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Art by **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

Stick a fork in it!

As we closed this issue it was being reported that E3, the massive pilgrimage to LA that brings the industry to a grinding halt, may finally be going the way of the dodo, at least in its present form, for the next year and the foreseeable future.

On a personal note, this marks a major milestone in what's been an eventful 15-year career in the games industry thus far. When I got started there were two CESs each year—both in Vegas (followed by Chicago; places where conventions actually belong) which were much smaller and more intimate productions than E3. Two a year was insanity but I've missed CES since gaming broke away to form what's become an excessive and altogether detrimental week-long waste of time and resources. Especially in the digital age: Do we really need to burn all of this fuel and electricity to see the latest games? Send me an asset CD and an exclusive trailer and I'm a happy camper.

I've spent the last year asking pretty much every publisher I've visited why they participate in E3 given that we can get way more and better information by simply visiting for a day to play games and access key team members. Seeing as how most large publishers meet with buyers and their marketing staffs throughout the year I could never figure out why they were willing to halt development—an expensive endeavor on its own—and spend more money than many games cost to develop to haul their company into a hot, crowded convention center to basically show us what we could easily and more comfortably see sitting in their cozy offices sipping cocoa. Not to mention the vague nature of E3 coverage given the state of most games shown and the massive number of outlets all clamoring for their 15 minutes. Even stranger is that in recent years most publishers have gotten into the habit of holding pre-E3 events, realizing that we're not thrilled with the week-long cattle simulation. During a pre-E3 visit to THQ they told me that if one big publisher pulled out, like say EA or one of the big three, then so would they, and the domino effect would start. Seems like somebody pulled the trigger (please redeem your free toaster and lifetime subscription at any time). With E3 out of the way I'd like to see publishers spend their money (and far less of it) on preparing enough quality assets to do their games and developers justice, so that the outlets they deem viable all receive exclusive assets to give their readers a fresh perspective from their individual points of view. Give us an hour with key members from each development team to ask our own questions and we'll give you superlative coverage, but jam us into a room for a rushed, rehearsed demo/pitch and then give us all the same 5 screens after you've spent a few million dollars for the privilege and well, that's just nuts.

I'll miss the city where two blocks away from where a group of guys make millions of dollars a year playing hoops, families are living under boxes and crack heads lumber about uttering "buy me a bumito" but I'm sure I'll get over it. So...back to Vegas!?

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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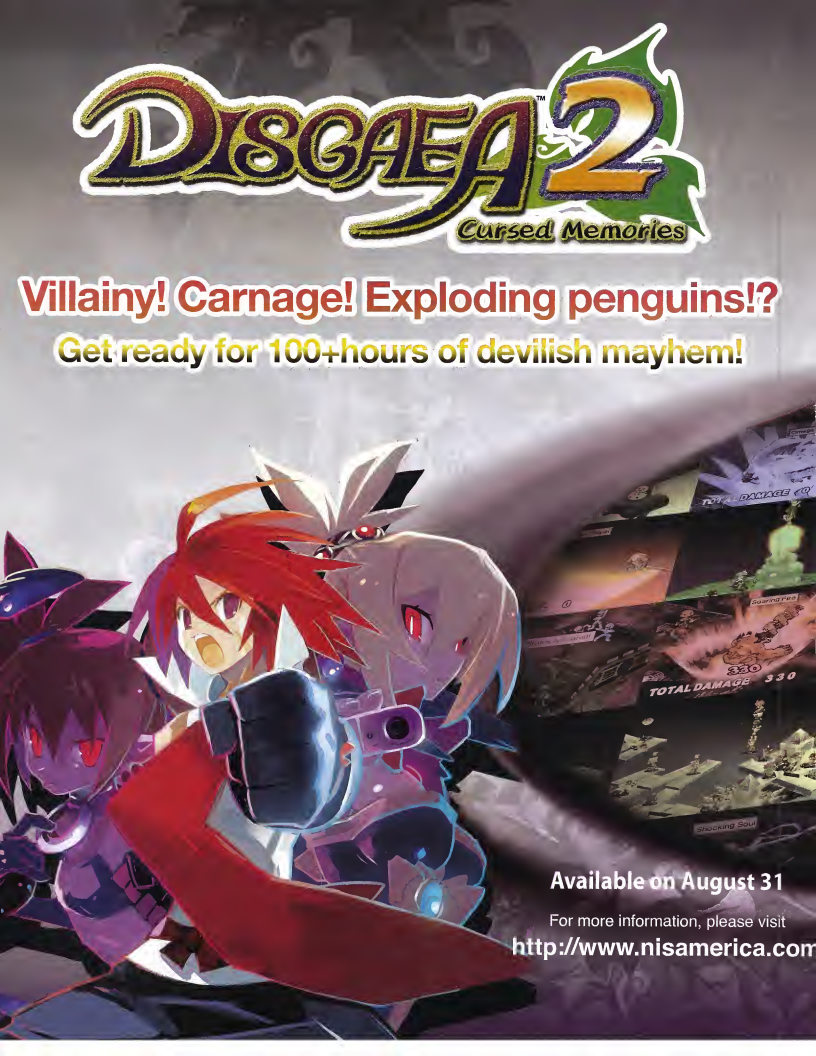
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Just Cause: Art by Sanford Green
Color by Danimation



Cover 2
Gods & Heroes
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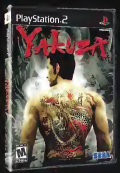
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playback

September 2006

letters@playmagzine.com



LETTER OF THE MONTH

The Mother of all problems

I've got a little problem. I just got the new issue of Play, while flipping through looking for something that catches my eye I come to the Mother 3 review, I stop dead in my tracks and read it.....G$% D&*%$ IT!!! I remember playing through Earthbound a few times being so overwhelmed by the story with its great humor and simple graphics and I can't believe that Nintendo won't give this series another chance here in the states. I'm 29-years-old and I fear that I'll never see it again in my lifetime. WHAT THE F&%$ DO I HAVE TO DO? I've written Nintendo quite a few times about this title and I even slip it in the comments section whenever they do the little software polls they send me through mynintendo. com. I refuse to import because the whole draw is the story and I don't read Japanese (I was actually considering trying to learn Japanese, but am too dumb). Nintendo if you have any soul and can hear me PLEASE MAKE THE RUMORED MOTHER 1, 2, and 3 DS compilation so us fans can die happy. Thanks, Play, for letting me use you as my voice.

Love Jack B

Take that Seuss!

Your impeccable taste in all things media has opened my mind to such pleasures as "Dead Leaves" and "Psychonauts". Two adventures of the mind that I probably would not have taken without your recommendation. Recently I read something in your May 2006 issue that has cemented my subscription. Casey Loe said this in one of his articles-quote "and if you are a teenager now, you'll probably laugh out loud at the simplistic crap dumb Gen-Xers like me lived for, and then go back to beating nuns in whatever piece of rapper-endorsed trash you'll consider "classic" long after I'm dead." End quote. I love the fact that Casey said this and the fact that it was printed in a national magazine, especially when one of your competitors features this "trash" on the cover every other month. Love, love, love it.

Regarding Dave's question from this month's issue about perusing Play in the digital format, I for one would enjoy any and all content. I would definitely not want to lose the physical magazine for any reason. For me, I think the art would lose some of its allure on screen. Besides, my son has enjoyed bed-time game reviews since he was a baby. Who needs Dr. Seuss when you have Play?

Lincoln

Tangible media

I don't know why, but I cherish my "brick and mortar" collection of videogame information. I know it's been shackled by lead times when compared to the net, but you guys have really been tightening that gap impressively. It seems like I had been back from LA for merely days when my Play came in with some tidbits from the big show. I don't believe anybody has gotten the marriage between their print publication and their online counterpart "just right" just yet, at least not for me. I have a couple of faves I hit daily, and trickle over to the rest when time allows, yours included. Personally, I'd like to see a Play

Halo, Dead or Alive 3 and Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee were all better games than anything the 360 launched with (Oblivion and Dead or Alive 4 didn't make launch). Best of all, I can now rest easy knowing that I'm not the only person on Earth who enjoyed Quantum Redshift. You even mentioned Tao Feng!

Nice way to ring in the month of my birthday. Keep up the great work.

Best,
Michael Ford

PS3 Price is right

I am so tired of people saying that PS3 costs so much money. PS3 is a lot of things but in today's terms it does not cost too much. Just look at other items. First there is the iPod. It costs $300.00-$400.00 for an iPod with 60GB of memory.

> **"I am so tired of people saying that PS3 costs so much money..."**

website which is very much an extension of the magazine. I'd be very literal about it. Start with icons of the latest issue on the left column, and below that in descending order all the issues up to the Jak & Daxter-ish. I have no idea as to the profitability or marketability or desirability or any of this in regards to the mass market, but as a collector and videogame fiend I would spend additional hours per month on your site. Would it hurt the subscription or newsstand bottom line? I doubt it. I could never get by on digital alone and the kids who do don't buy your magazine. Here is what I can't seem to get enough of: editorials from you and the staff, letters, and interviews with the gaming gods. Let the personality of the Play staff shine on the web and I think you may discover a winning formula.

Greg Bandera

X-Boxer

Thanks for the retrospective look at the original Xbox in your August issue. Strangely enough, the Xbox was my favorite console of its generation, and it was nice to see it get some props. I, too, thought the console sported a rather attractive launch lineup. In my opinion, .n advanced PDA could set you back a few hundred for the longest time. A Razer phone costs more than 400 when it first went on sale and still costs a few hundred, as well as other phones that cost well over the $500 mark. These are just a few things that cost major bucks, yet sell a ship load every year. Now look at another list that is more in common with the PS3. A graphics card for PC that is capable to do what the PS3 can do cost $400.00 or more and that's just the graphics card. A PC that can do the basics such as Email, web browser, video chat, and picture editing cost about $400.00 and that's with a bare minimum graphics card. And no Wi-Fi included or other aspects of PS3 included out of the box. A Blu-Ray player costs 1,000.00 well above the $600.00 cost of PS3. And games will use them.
Think about using different engines in one game. Take GTA: SA in that game you can drive but it's not a great driving game, replace the code with a Burnout-type engine and have race tracks like GT. Also fighting happens in that game but it's BASIC, replace the code with a VF-type engine to make it more realistic. Also in the game you shoot but only using 3 rd-person, what if you could switch to FP view. Throw in a sims-like engine to have characters interact with each other. ... ETC. And now you see why games need to have more disk space.
SO looking at all that PS3 brings to gaming and additional abilities it is not expensive. Not to mention that it lasts a long time. PS2 will be out 6 years prior to PS3 launch. And will have a few good years left in it. Seeing how so far games have not changed much for this coming generation of games (on both Xbox360 or PS3) I see no reason to hurry and buy now I can sit back and enjoy a few more PS2 games and get PS3 when it's sitting on the shelf and with more games to choose from; same will happen in 7 years when the next Sony system comes out.
The only question is what is important to the person, their iPod, Razer, or other entertainment devices or would they rather have a PS2? But looking at what people buy, cost is really not the main issue, making the decision what a person wants most is.

Roland Gibson

Culture shock

I was wondering: do Americans (and I mean the USA) make any good console video games? I know we make good FPSs, but what about survival horror, RPGs and even a good street fighting game? (MK is dead.) Where are our Resident Evils, Final Fantasy's, and Dead or Alives? I got all excited about Jade Empire (Play, August 2006, p. 45) being an American RPG, but it was made by Canadians, which is cool since we're both North Americans, but I'm concerned about the USA here. Seriously, I know we invented the FPS, but is that all we can do: make a PC FPS and port it? Why are the British and French making better video games than us? GTA is Scottish! Tomb Raider is English! Prince of Persia is French! American developers and publishers, start making good games, please! Like we need good American literature, we need good, American console video games. Do we even have a video game culture?
Anyway, I'm going to go check out Jade Empire. At least the Canadian Bioware is doing something positive.
Thank you for your time and for having a video game magazine that doesn't suck.

Sincerely,

Stephen O

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PSP Chatter

PSP Firmware Updates, Movies on Memory Stick from Sony



Just as July came to a close, Sony updated the firmware for their PSP hardware to version 2.8. What's new in this version? The ability to now subscribe to video and image RSS feeds, full support for downloading demos via the PSP's browser, Location Free Player updates, and support for AAC audio files with the .3gp extension. One of the most welcome updates under 2.8, however, was that support for user-created video has now received a long awaited shot in the arm. Video files now go into a "VIDEO" folder in the root directory of your memory stick, no longer need to be renamed to an obscure series of letters and numbers, and best of all, encoded video files no longer require PSP-specific information in their headers. This means that any program that can encode video into MPEG4 format can now output files that the PSP can support - video files encoded for an IPod via QuickTime, for example.

Speaking of video files running from a memory stick, Sony has recently started a new deal where if you buy a specially marked 1GB or 2GB memory stick, they include a DVD which contains four movies: The Grudge, S.W.A.T., Hitch, and XXX: State of the Union. Using an enclosed access code, you can transfer one (and only one) of the four movies onto your new memory stick for viewing on your PSP. Is it a good plan B in case movies on UMD go away for good? Probably not, but it's certainly an interesting development.

DS Lite dominates

New colors, world domination



The DS Lite's success in Japan is, to put it in a scientific term, "freakin' crazy." On July 20th, Japan's fourth color option–Noble Pink–was released, and six months after the hardware revision first hit the land of the rising sun, lines once again formed around the country in hopes of snagging one. According to video game hardware sales from Media Create, for the week that the Noble Pink DSL was released (of which it was only available for the last three days), sales of the DS Lite were over 262,000 units. To give you an idea of what that number means, that's around 200,000 more units than every other piece of video game hardware sold combined. DS Lites are still hard to find in Japanese stores, and with at least three new versions coming soon (Jet Black hits Japan on September 2nd, and special editions for Final Fantasy III and Pokemon are coming), sales don't look to be slowing down anytime soon.

It isn't just Japan where the DS Lite is gaining in popularity, however. In the States—where the Onyx and Corral versions will hit Sept.13 at the regular price of 129.99—the DS Lite sold over 600,000 units in June, and over the first ten days of the European launch of the handheld, more than 200,000 units found loving homes.

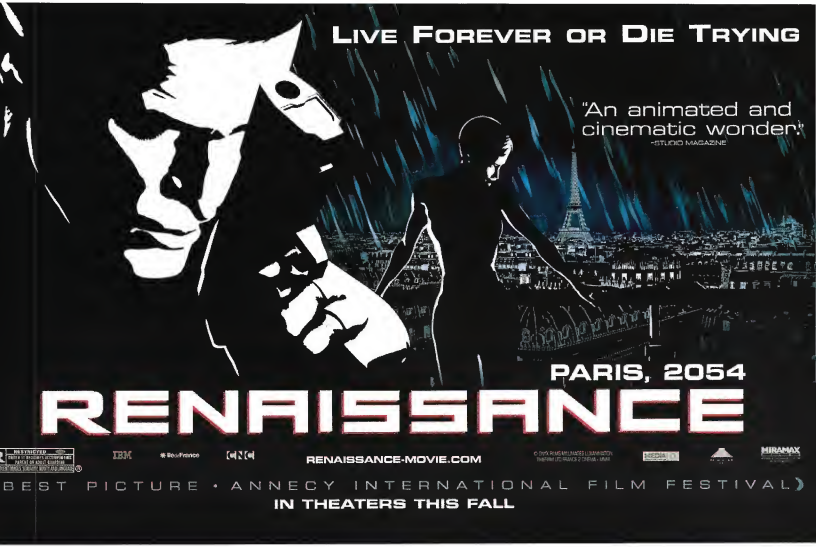


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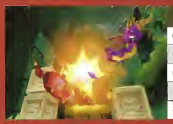
400 years on one DVD



After spanning 400 years and three sequels, the Jak and Daxter Legacy still has some Dark Eco left in its tank—the Jak and Daxter Complete Trilogy DVD Movie. A 90-minute cinematic voyage through the trilogy leading up to how the pair arrived at the start line of Jak X: Combat Racing, Sony is giving fans the opportunity to win a copy of the limited edition DVD by entering at www.jakxdvd.com just as long as you tell a friend…or five. That's right, in a move right out of a Ronco infomercial, as long as you provide the email addresses of five friends, you're in. They might even throw in a jerky machine.



play magazine Editor Top 5/Now Playing



Dave Halverson	
01	The Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning Sierra / PS2
02	Just Cause Eidos / Xbox 360
03	Saints Row THQ / Xbox 360
04	Monster House THQ / GC
05	Ninety Nine Nights Microsoft / Xbox 360



Brady Fiechter	
01	The Darkness 2K / Xbox 360
02	Prey Nintendo 2K / Xbox 360
03	LocoRoco Sony / PSP
04	New Super Mario Bros. Nintendo / NDS
05	Metal Gear Solid 3 Konami / PS2



Greg Orlando	
01	Dead Rising Capcom/ Xbox 360
02	Yakuza Sega / PS2
03	Star Trek Tactical Assault Bethesda / NDS
04	Monster House THQ / GC
05	Ninety Nine Nights Microsoft / Xbox 360



Casey Loe	
01	Yakuza Sega / PS2
02	Osu! Tatake! Quendan! Nintendo / NDS
03	Xenosaga Episode III Namco-Bandai / PS2
04	Okami Capcom / PS2
05	Phantasy Star Universe Sega / PS2



Heather Campbell	
01	Sonic Gems Sega/ PS2
02	Halo 2 Microsoft / Xbox
03	Brain Training Nintendo / NDS
04	Sonic Rush Sega / PS2
05	FFXI Square Enix / Xbox 360

Nick DesBarres	
01	Gurumin Falcom / PSP
02	Brave Story Sony / PSP
03	Senko No Ronde Rev.X Sega/Xbox 360
04	FFXI Square Enix / Xbox 360
05	Psycho Fox Sega / Sega Master System

Eric Patterson	
01	SMT: Devil Summoner Atlus / PS2
02	Rocket Slime Square Enix / NDS
03	Galaga Namco-Bandai /Xbox 360
04	Ult. Block Party Conspiracy / PSP
05	King of Fighters '98 SNK/Neo-Geo





System(s)	PS2, PC, Xbox 360	Publisher	Eidos
Developer	Avalanche Studios	Available	September 26

Eidos evens its scales with a leading man as cultivated and cagey as Ms. Croft

JUST CAUSE

words **Dave Halverson**

Behind the bravado of any blockbuster, what really makes a game sparkle lies in the hands of the developer—that special something that defines their specific style. Treasure, Team Ninja, Naughty Dog, Clover, Insomniac, Kojima Productions... You don't need to see a logo to know you're playing one of their games. Sweden's Avalanche Studios has that special something. Beyond one of the most powerful open-world engines we've seen thus far and Just Causes adrenaline-filled gameplay lies a game that carries their stamp as a group of individuals dedicated to not just making great games, but great experiences.

They call these "sandbox" games, although I'm not sure why, being that sandboxes are confining and for the most part unexciting. I much prefer the term "open-world" as these games are, above all, about non-linearity and freedom, and none so much as this. Just Cause takes whatever label you choose and blows it into tiny little bits. Open-world is a blast, but open sky...even cooler.

You are Rico Rodriguez, agency operative extraordinaire. A one-man revolution with the tenacity of El Mariachi, cunning of James Bond, control of Neo, and balls of Xander Cage.

You begin Just Cause in a user-controlled plummet, switching between freefall and Rico's parachute as you careen

toward a white sandy beach where a local mob has your commanding officers pinned down. As soon as the shooting stops, off you go aboard a turret fixed on the back of a jeep speeding down a winding dirt road, blowing up pursuers and downing attack choppers like Michael Bay with a blank check, until finally you eliminate the threat and arrive at your first mission briefing. Its one helluva way to begin a game; cinematic, adrenaline charged, and most of all, god-damn fun as hell.

Welcome to San Esperito, a tropical paradise turned living hell, where life is cheap and brutality the law under the tyrannical rule of the ruthless and corrupt dictator Salvador Mendoza. Power on San Esperito is divided between the military, drug barons, police and oppositional guerrillas. Your job is regime change—liberating rebel camps and infiltrating local cartels while fending off corrupt government forces until you've made enough allies to pull off the coup—and your playground to do so is a massive 1300-square-mile island chain. You thought Oblivion was big, open, and free? GTA? Postage stamps! And not only is San Esperito immense but it's far more diverse than what you're used to. Dense jungles, winding mountain roads, miles of dirt trails, peninsulas, rolling hills, sheer cliffs, villages, towns, beaches, and metropolitan cities make up the vast topography. But this isn't Oblivion or GTA...to hell with trekking from place to place, or even driving. Sure you can jack a car, truck, moped, or motorcycle; call for a drop and later in the game a helicopter or even jet (yep, it's that big) but you can also glide... Let's say Rico is a few thousand feet above sea level staring across a peninsula where on the other side a government operative marked for elimination is making his getaway. Rico can fire his grappling hook onto an attack chopper, commandeering it, fly across the channel and then abandon ship, sending him gliding across the channel where he can land on the roof of a nearby car and then leap from car to car until he reaches the target and jumps in for the kill—all seamless. Any vehicle in the game—even jets—double as large moving platforms. If Rico can drive or fly it, he can ride it and launch from it. Need to make a quick getaway? Jettison your car off a cliff in stunt mode and glide down onto a dock, jack a speedboat and take to the sea...climb out onto the boat pull your chute, glide onto a passing car and in you go. This is freedom like you've never experienced before in a video game...and it's completely unrestricted.

The gameplay itself, while genre endemic, is just as free. In the vein of Mercenaries, Just Cause employs a series of core missions (assassination, annihilation, liberation—you know the drill) that open a thread of linked sub-missions, which you can accept or dismiss at your leisure. If you feel suitably equipped for the story-integral mission ahead, you can call for a chopper, head for the closest mobile HQ and away you go, however, help out the local cartels and militia and you'll usually find a nice new toy waiting for you...like a rocket launcher—always handy to shake off bothersome militia when you're torching coca fields. The more liberating and inside work Rico does the more influential he becomes, so it is wise to lose yourself in the seedy underbelly of San Esperito.

> "Welcome to San Esperito, a tropical paradise turned living hell, where life is cheap and brutality the law."



When things get too hot, Rico can always head for the nearest bluff...











Liberating small camps and villages is a snap—pop a few corrupt policia, blow a few barricades and capture the flag—but towns and cities offer far more resistance. The more territory you liberate from regime control the better your back-up and weaponry when things get hot, and this is one volatile combat zone.

Playing on 360, it's hard to fathom how the game even exists on PS2, even though the draw distance is roughly 12 miles, compared to around 50 on 360, where the game looks like a postcard from paradise via added per-pixel motion blur, high dynamic range, depth-of-field, soft shadows, dynamic dirt maps, bending vegetation, cloud shadows, and enhanced terrain and wildlife systems. ...Waves slowly fold onto the shore, you can see through the crystal waters to the coral below, sunsets and sunrises color drench the entire island, and the dense jungle is so real it's hard to believe Avalanche has granted us unlimited access. How they programmed all of this in under a half decade is beyond me. The wilderness in Just Cause makes Oblivion look like GTA. It's that beautiful and that free. You can grab a bike or auto and literally drive around for hours, crossing huge suspension bridges, passing through towns and cities, going off road to discover tiny villages and camps, or board any number of sea craft to explore the sparkling shoreline and inner canals. ...Jump off a cliff and float into the wild on foot, or into the sea for a swim. It's difficult to describe really. I've never experienced a game this open. If you like to live in your game world, Just Cause gets an A+ for that aspect alone. There's plenty of run 'n gun too—do take a mission now and again to remind yourself it's a game—and a story as robust as the gameplay, loaded with colorful (and shady) characters from both sides of the political and economic struggle.

Just Cause is nothing short of miraculous. With staggeringly beautiful visuals, just enough exaggeration to remove us from reality, over a hundred useable vehicles, and one of the best soundtracks in recent years, it doesn't get much better than this.

INTERVIEW

Linus Blomberg Joint CEO and Technical Director
Odd Ahlgrens Content Director



Linus Blomberg Odd Ahlgrens

How does a group from Sweden come up with an open-world political thriller infested with drug cartels and rampant chaos for their first game? You certainly could have chosen an easier genre for your debut, and talk to us about this insane engine...

Odd: We certainly could. But we didn't. The first rough draft for Just Cause was written in a bar by Nils Gulliksen and Christofer Sundberg. There were plenty of drinks involved when they finally put pen to paper. At the time they were probably too "inspired" to think about the consequences of such a complex and grand title. We are all lucky they were, because Just Cause has proved to be an extremely cool and challenging game to work on. The engine is developed by brothers Linus and Viktor Blomberg and their engine is indeed insane in so many ways. It is a landscaping engine that mimics the topographic/geographic facts of real-life, making the weather and other factors change independently. And it enables us to build extremely big worlds, just like the one used in Just Cause.

What struck me instantly about Just Cause was the gameplay. Dropped in (literally) to a shit-storm, immersion is rapid, and, for a clip, non-stop. ... Riding a car off a sheer cliff and popping the parachute only to float down onto a dock and speed away on a boat in one seamless action is like nothing else, and that's nothing compared to what Rico can do over the long haul. Within hours I was using a jet as a platform/ guided missile. I suppose one would have to say that it's the first "extreme" open-world game. Who came up with the concept and how long has it taken you to get to this point?

Odd: Well, it's part of our legend today, and nobody knows who came up with what or when. But one thing is for sure: our protagonist Rico was first intended to be the "black sheep of the extreme sports circuit", so the notion of extreme action was with us from square one. It has taken us about three years to get to this point, and it has been as interesting and extreme a ride for us as it has our hero Rico.

Is San Esperito really half the size of Jamaica?

Linus: No. It used to be. But it really didn't make sense from a gameplay point-of-view so we reduced it to "only" about a tenth of the size of Jamaica, or 250,000 acres (1024 square kilometers), including jungles, roads, highways, villages, cities, key locations such as casinos, prisons and brothels and much, much more. With this size and detail we actually tangent the limits of the numerical precision of 32-bit processors, which basically means that this game really has been a challenge!

"Those who have been to the Caribbean all say that it feels just like the real thing..."
~Odd Ahlgrens

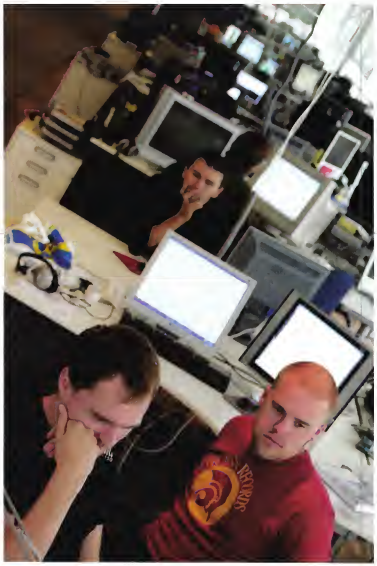
The only tell-tale signs that Just Cause's lead format was PS2 is the ancillary character models. Is this as good as they can look for the game to run smoothly?

Linus: Most of the characters were designed by Oscar Chiconi, the internationally acclaimed artist. Instead of extreme realism we have aimed towards a more stylized look. So that has little to do with technology. Clearly, as a developer we always want to improve and polish things to infinity. But the game is so big and ground-breaking in many areas at once and we had to draw the line somewhere. It's always a balance, but I am extremely pleased with the end result.

The textures and effects on the 360 version are outstanding. ...The number and integrity of the trees, the water, the lighting, Rico's hair and normal-mapped clothing, etc., etc... ...Is this a straight PC port or are there some 360-only elements in here?

Linus: It is not a straight PC port at all. We've spent the last six months pushing the 360 version so there are lots of extra 360-only elements in there. Lighting and





Sweden looks a lot like California.



shadowing, terrain rendering, post-effects. All those areas and many more have been improved for the 360 version.

How are you getting this game to run on last-gen at all? Having only played the 360 version I can't imagine it.
Linus: Remember it was originally made for last-gen. And it looks and plays great on those machines as well. Actually, as a programmer I'm most proud of what we achieved on those platforms. The original Xbox and PS2 are the platforms we squeezed the most out of per available megabyte and Mhz, so to speak. And that really gave us a good starting point when we added the 360 platform. It was already so well optimized that we could just ramp up stuff and throw in more and more candy without hurting performance. So obviously the game looks best on Xbox 360, especially since it's true high-definition.

How do you go about building an island chain—especially one as rugged as San Esperito? Its topography is amazingly realistic.
Odd: It has to do with the genius Avalanche engine and of course the combined efforts of our art and level design departments. A lot of work and research has been done to make it look both cool and realistic. Those who have been to the Caribbean all say that it feels just like the real thing, riding your motorcycle along a desolate road in the sunset, you can almost smell the jerk chicken, salty air, dense jungle and burning coal.

Nice writing too and I like the performances. Did you have to import your talent?
Odd: The game was written by Matthew Costello and Neil Richards. Those guys are about as experienced as they come, having published 20+ novels, written TV shows and a multitude of video games between them. They were very enthusiastic about the project and collaborated with us on it until the very end of the line. The voiceovers were recorded at Salami Studios in LA with the aid of the very talented Gordon Hunt and some expert voice actors. The coolest thing for us though was that, by a weird turn of events, Pepe Serna (the guy who got his arm chainsawed off in Scarface) turned up one day to record some stuff for us. Such things make you a believer!

The sense of freedom, assorted vehicles, and especially the magic parachute, add immensely to the overall experience, but how will you keep the gameplay fresh for the duration?
Odd: Well, it's pretty much up to the player. With about 20 story missions and hundreds of side-missions there will be plenty of cool gaming before anyone should grow tired. But, just like in real life: if you just want to kick back at the beach you're bound to get a little bored.

Linus: I actually mostly find myself trying to do cooler and cooler stunts, and it's hard getting tired of that. And when I feel like moving the story forward I do some missions. Sometimes I even play the same missions several times just because I figured out a more suave stunt-practicing way to accomplish it!

Guilty as charged. How much of the way the game unfurls hangs on the side-missions?
Odd: Most of the actual unfurling is dependent on the story missions. The side-missions will add other qualities to the game.

Sticking to the core missions, at what point would Rico find himself outgunned?
Odd: Naaaah. We ain't gonna tell you that.

You'll just have to play the game and see. Are you the kind of guy who'opens your birthday presents before your actual birthday and then haphazardly wraps them back together again with scotch tape?

They say "ain't" in Sweden? I of course already know, but I ain't telling either. Near as I can tell the entire island chain is inhabitable—How do you do collision on a land mass this size? Is it as daunting a task as it seems?
Linus: Our proprietary technology uses a hybrid of procedural algorithms and streaming schemes to accomplish this. Developing an engine that can deal with worlds of this size and detail is very daunting indeed, but we believe that is the future of gaming and we will continue on that track. Gamers must get out of those endless dungeons and restricted levels now, it's 2008! Mankind has left the caves millennia ago, time to catch up!

Your company credo speaks to caring equally about players and technology, and it certainly shows in Just Cause. What is your background with games? What are some of your favorites old and new?
Linus: Most of the guys at Avalanche are games-developer veterans, and I think there are as many favorite games as there are developers here. But speaking for myself, my all-time favorite is the original Elite for the Acorn BBC Model B. That game did much of what we're trying to do, creating an open and huge world, well beyond what's supposed to be possible on the respective platform.

Odd: My faves of all times are Fallout I and II. Those games had everything I want from entertainment. The classic coin-op Gauntlet is also a game I play most regularly.

This team is surely dotted with big talent. What have some of Avalanche's staffers worked on prior to joining up?
Linus: Our team consists mainly of Swedes, so not surprisingly the track records are dominated by titles from other Swedish developers, such as the Battlefield series, Chronicles of Riddick, Headhunter, etc.

To me, Rico is Antonio Banderas, although I sense a spot of Bond in him as well. Have you seen Desperado? Does Rico have some El Mariachi in his virtual blood?
Odd: Indeed Rico is a little bit of both El Mariachi and James Bond. But we feel that mixing the two (and a million other movie bad-asses), we have created a truly inspiring and original character. A bad-boy, Latin lover, Black-Ops operative mixing his own salsa suaveness with the brutality, cynicism and efficiency of that great unnamed intelligence agency that everyone knows all and nothing about (you know who).

The vehicle designs are also extraordinary, kind of a neo-'50s thing mixed in with current day—as are the drug lords, with their frog-like visages. I like that the game has an exaggerated element to it. Is this your stamp, or a way to remind the player that it's only a game?
Odd: That is one of the reasons. And also because we wanted the game to instantly convey the feel of Cuba/Colombia/Jamaica/Mexico as seen through a comic book/action movie filter. You have to paint with broad strokes to get the feeling across amid the hail of bullets and bombs and cool one-liners. It's an over-the-top game, it needs over-the-top design.

Speaking of stamps, is the soundtrack being done in-house? It's el perfecto.
Odd: Nope, the soundtrack is made by a guy named Rob Lord, a very groovy computer games music composer.

With a few months to go what areas of the game will you be focusing on leading up to the big debut?
Linus: The last months are all about polishing. We've been working on this game for more than three years now and it's going to be great to see it on the shelves.

Anything you'd like to say to the people?
We hope you all enjoy playing Just Cause as much as we've enjoyed making it! ¡Viva la Revolución! **play**

"Developing an engine that can deal with worlds of this size and detail is very daunting indeed..."

~Linus Blomberg



System(s)	PC	Publisher	Sony Online Entertainment
Developer	Perpetual Entertainment	Available	November

Gods & Heroes
Rome Rising

And the grandeur that is Rome …

words **Greg Orlando**

The gods must be either crazy, thirsty, or in need of some serious tribute. As an adventurer in the days of the early Roman republic, players in Sony Online's new massively multiplayer online title get to be god's right arm on planet Earth. It's a tough and dirty job, one oftentimes fraught with pain and stabbing, but it's all worth it because, hey, it's good to have god—even if it's only the god of ill-timed flatulence—on your side.

Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising takes a unique look at ancient Roman culture and online role-playing titles. It's a rather novel concept to set an online title in a historically based past, and to have players operate under the direction of 12 separate Roman gods who were, as the texts are clear in mentioning, were notoriously fickle creatures. With Rising, developer Perpetual Entertainment blends the disparate notions of history and fantasy together with oftentimes-contradictory elements taken from Greek and Roman mythology to form a cohesive whole.

And the gods should be pleased at this.

"It's good to have god—even if it's only the god of ill-timed flatulence—on your side."



Creation Myth ...

There's not a mythology on Earth worth a lick of salt that doesn't have its own story on how the world came to be. For the creators of Rising, their story is inherently tied into the Greco-Roman creation myth, a tale of how the world was created by the Titans, a series of powerful gods who were themselves supplanted by the Olympian gods and their leader Jupiter.

The Titans battled the Olympians with the aid of a third race of gods known as the Telchines. And it's here that Rising forms the basis of its plot.

"A long time before the time frame we're actually playing in," Stieg Hedlund, Rising's lead designer says, "thousands of years ago, when the Olympian gods and the Titans were fighting for supremacy over the world and the universe, the Titans had the Telchines on their side. It was kind of a deadlock, until the Olympians enlisted Hercules to help them; he was able to swing the balance and the Olympian gods won. The Titans were banished, as were the Telchines."

Perpetual Entertainment's president Chris McKibbin says. "The important point for us is that symbiotic relationship between the classic hero that was Hercules who was helping the Olympian gods win their war. This allowed man to gain dominion over the land. It also created the relationship between gods, working and helping man, and man paying homage to the gods in return.

"The second really important point about that story for us is that in their victory, the Titans were banished to Hades," he says. "As for the Telchines, who were really this mysterious race of gods, nobody knows what happens to them. Even in mythology, no one knows what happens to them. So, now, flash forward to our time ..."

"So, now, things have started to go a little bit strange for the young republic of Rome," Hedlund says, taking over for McKibbin. "Apart from the usual stuff that was going on where they were struggling for survival on the Italian peninsula, fighting against all the other tribes—including the Greeks, the Samnites, and the Gauls—who were all vying for that piece of land. The creatures of myth are now much more present and visible to ordinary people from the heartland of Rome. The wise men, the oracles, have sort of figured that this is all because the Telchines are back, and they're trying to start another Titan war.

"They're trying to eliminate the heroes of Rome, so that the Olympians don't have heroes to call on this time around," he says.

As a neophyte hero of Rome, one with possibly untapped potential, players find themselves enmeshed in this struggle between the gods. In fact, all heroes in Rising begin their adventure on Telchinos Island, where they are "guests" of the Telchines. An extended stay, to be sure, is not recommended.



Making Bob...

Rising's first hands-on playtest begins with the creation of Bob. There are six separate character classes in Rising: Gladiators are back-alley fighters who, after gaining

> "...Bob is, more or less, an Adonis, despite a bulging gutline and an untamed beard."



experience can branch off into two separate paths, one reliant on the use of nets in combat and the other utilizing fighting gloves and emphasizing wrestling holds. Soldiers specialize in more skilled forms of combat and are sturdier than gladiators. Scouts are fleet of foot and good with ranged combat; rogues can use their special abilities to conceal themselves and ambush foes. Priests and mystics deal with sorcery in various forms.

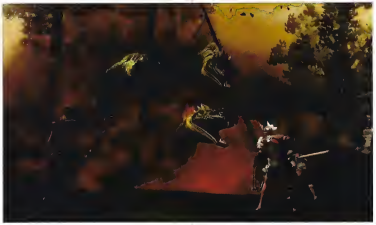
Adventurers in Rising, regardless of class, can specialize in specific types of combat, as the gladiator does with his nets and fighting gloves. Each class has a specific skill tree with core feats and specialized fighting styles. Once Rogues have mastered basic skills such as backstabbing, evasion, and distraction, they can branch off into distance fighting—which requires the use of a rope—or close-quarters combat. Choosing to focus on close-quarters combat makes it possible to perform debilitating kicks to an opponent's groin or issue strikes that easily penetrate enemy armor, whereas distanced fighting provides for entangling attacks. In addition to individual-specific skills, characters can also choose unit feats that directly influence the entirety of their party.

To be frank, Bob is, more or less, an Adonis, despite a bulging gutline and an untamed beard. This man can make even a bright purple-and-green scout's tunic look impressively masculine; the two-toned color scheme he's chosen will appear not only on his clothes, but also the armors he wears, as well on those of the non-player minions who accompany him into battle. His features, including minutiae such as width of his cheeks or the size of his lower body, are all malleable. No two players in Rising will look the same way, this is certain.

Each hero will serve under a god. Individual classes offer a choice of two deities, and servitude has its benefits. Mystics can pay honor to either Bacchus, the god of wine, or Trevia, the three-faced goddess of the crossroads; Scouts can opt to work with either the goddess of the hunt, Diana, or the sun god Apollo, and so forth.

In return for servitude—the game offers specific gold-coded "god quests"—heroes receive specific powers from their chosen lord. Certain powers allow for the summoning of mythological creatures or the casting of devastating spells. Gods also offer specific immunities to their followers, or other benefits. For scouts, Apollo grants his followers special healing powers, as well as the ability to summon colossi into battle. Diana bestows upon players the ability to call forth the lion-goat-snake monstrosity the chimaera, or conjure a powerful star shower to smite nearby enemies.

As a scout, Bob will in turn confer certain advantages on anyone who travels with him, making them move more swiftly. He'll also be skilled with a bow, something that will not save him from a trip to Telchinos Island.





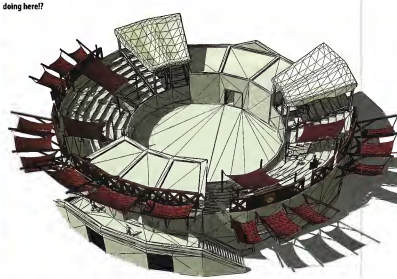


Viva Telchinos Island!

Players begin the game as a guest of the newly restored Telchines. It's here on Telchinos Island players will get their first taste of gladiatorial combat, death, quests, the favor of the gods, and some of Rising's mythological beasties.

The goal here is simple: Escape. "You

What the heck is King Ghidora doing here!?







Mostly dead is slightly alive

"Each hero will serve under a god. Individual classes offer a choice of two deities, and servitude has its benefits."

Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising deals with death in a rather unique way, one the game's developers have plucked straight from the beliefs of the ancient Romans themselves.

"Since you're of Olympian blood, you don't actually ever die as such," the game's lead designer Stieg Hedlund says. "What happens is that you are killed and you come back to life, but you have what we refer to as a 'soul fracture.'"

Soul fractures cause reduction in a hero's stats, and this puts an affected hero at a disadvantage until the situation can be rectified. Repairs can be made to a fractured soul in one of three ways: The hero must return to the spot where he fell and recover the missing piece of his soul. For a fee, resurrers in the game world can mend fractures. Those unwilling to pay or hunt for their missing soul can simply wait it out; a soul will restore itself after a time.

Death will not impact unduly on a hero's minions, either. "As a player you have the ability—as granted to you by the gods—to resurrect your own minions," Perpetual's president Chris McKibbin says. "You don't have the ability, unless you're a powerful priest, to resurrect other players or other player's minions." Minions will take a "death penalty" that is cumulative until you bring them back to camp and effectively have them cured."

are one of the captured heroes," McKibbin says. "You don't yet know your own potential, but the Telchine gods—who have wisdom far beyond that of mortals—have realized it."

A hero's first view is of gladiatorial combat, as seen through the gates of an arena. Guards are standing watch at the gate. Past the gates, a battle is taking place. Soldiers are being slaughtered and the message need not be made clearer by Perpetual. *You are next.*

Getting a weapon is the first step, and easily accomplished. What's more pressing is gaining a god's favor and finding a way off Telchinos. Along the way, a neophyte hero will need to find items to offer his god or goddess; seek training; and battle monsters such as satyrs, dwarf-like dactyli, skeletons, and snakes. About 20 or so human players will be on Telchinos at once, and can work in concert with one another to solve puzzles, complete quests, and kill monsters. The final task, however, can only be performed solo.

"Listen, Bob," one of the game's quest-giving NPCs says. "I'm going to help you get back to Rome, but there is one more thing you've got to do, and it's not going to be easy. Go back to Necros Village. Before you enter, speak with the acolyte waiting outside, and do exactly as he says. I know it sounds insane, but you've got to trust me, Bob. You are the child of Jupiter. You will need to show your faith in him before he can deliver you from this foul place."

What awaits players is the arena and a very powerful Gyrwn the Crusher—not to mention destiny. Players will escape Telchinos having earned their particular god's trust, and will be able to begin Rising in the game's public areas without, as the game says, the fear of death.



Everything that rises…

It's extremely easy to get lost in Rising's details.

Detailed animations for heroes, NPCs, and monsters bear witness to someone's—many someones, in truth—hard work. Centaurs will grab a hero, toss him in the air, impale him with a thrown spear, grab the spear as it sticks out of the prone hero's chest, and cruelly yanks it out. There's personality to be had in these movements, and if the game's denizens can't communicate verbally, they certainly can in the way they charge, stomp, and even absentmindedly clean their sandals during down time.

A specially designed back-end system will allow players to have a page for each of their characters, one where they can display their hero's statistics, items, minions, and accessories. Chris "Binky" Launius, Perpetual's manager of community relations, states these pages will be wholly customizable, right down to the ability to receive RSS feeds. If players want news on other games, they can get it through Rising's hero pages.

Making the Mythology

Perpetual's designers have pored through a lot of mythology texts to ensure Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising has an authentic feel to it.

"Probably our favorite [research] resource is one that's on the Web," Stieg-Hedlund, the game's lead designer says. "There's a site that's called Theoi.com. It's a very well done compendium of Greek and Roman myth. They have an entry for each creature or god or spirit or whatever, and they list all the sources in literature they used for the entry. It's very authoritative and very well done."

And beyond Theoi.com? "We looked a lot at the source material," Hedlund says. "[Virgil's] The Aeneid and Ovid's Metamorphoses are some of our best source materials because they're distinctly Roman."

"It's an industry where people play other games," Launius says. "We're not going to put any roadblocks up."

At some point, the details must, regrettably, be damned; Rising has a hell of a big picture to consider, too.

As great heroes of Rome, players will draw underlings to them. Some can be hired and others obtained by defeating them in combat. "There are three types of minions in the game," McKibbin says, "At the very beginning, everybody gets light minions. Light minions are melee fighters, skirmishers, and spellcasters that anyone of any class can use. At the higher levels, there are myth minions. Myth minions can only be used by the class/god that unlocks that specific creature. Heavy minions are significantly stronger minions than light ones, and you can only get them in your class.

"Every one of your minions has melee stats, ranged stats, defensive armor stats, resistances, their own equipment sets, health, energy, etc., etc." McKibbin adds. It's not been finalized yet, but Rising will allow three or four minions to accompany an adventurer into combat, and an additional 14 or so can be kept in a player's camp.

Squad-based combat affords players great opportunities for strategy. Minions can be placed into pre-set formations or players can opt to create, and then save, their own unique ones. In combat, a player can issue commands to the squad as a whole, to specific units within the squad (spellcasters, melee fighters, etc.), or to individual characters.

Armchair generals will have a field day with Rising. Teams of players can pool their squads to create a small army, and the game's command system lets players be absolutely sneaky. It's possible to send quick-moving scouts or rogues forward from the hero's main force in order to lure enemies into a trap. Melee forces can pin down foes, allowing a squad of archers and spellcasters to strike with impunity.

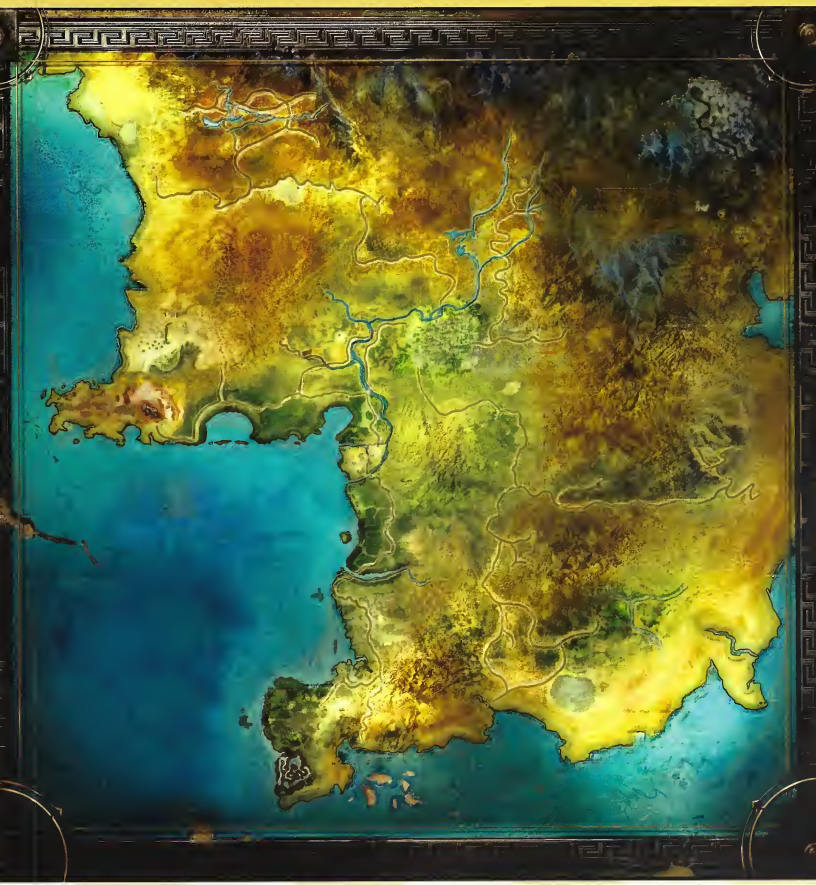
Still months away from its planned November release, Rising is still being shaped and polished. And there's more, much more to its story than a mere six pages' worth of text could even hint at: synchronized swimming; possibly the best water in all of video games (so McKibbin claims); and the firm belief that some day, perhaps when the game sees expansion, heroes in Rome Rising will indeed get to travel to Olympus or Hades.

This, then, is the stuff of legends. **play**

"Past the gates, a battle is taking place. Soldiers are being slaughtered and the message need not be made clearer by Perpetual. You are next."







System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Ubisoft	Available	November
Developer	Ubisoft Paris	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E 10+



Rayman
Raving Rabbids



Interview

Adrian Lacey Game Manager
Ubisoft Paris



play: Something, apparently, has stirred the rabbits. What exactly is going on in Rayman Raving Rabbids?
The bunnies have been preparing an invasion for centuries ...Now it's time for them to rule the world. This is obviously very cliché and far from complex storytelling. But the simplistic storyline and design by the team has allowed us to create hysterical parodies and strange situations for the player. It is a mix of comedy such as Mars Attacks, Scary Movie and Monty Python, basically the more absurd and ridiculous everything seems the better.

The story begins with the invasion and the bunnies lead by "Jabba Rabbit" who have enslaved Rayman and his friends using them as a source of entertainment in their gladiator style trials, where they try to ridicule Rayman on a daily basis. To progress you must become the most popular gladiator in history and gain the support of the bunnies!



It's been said that Rabbids is the darkest-themed Rayman game. Can you explain why this is true or false?
We can definitely say that in RRR, Rayman will encounter the scariest and most formidable enemy ever, since becoming a super hero, personally I am frightened just speaking about these insane little bunnies, I get the feeling that they are constantly watching me, somewhere, somehow...!

The traller for the Wii version of Rayman Raving Rabbids showed what appeared to be a giant robotic bunny shooting a laser and destroying the couch of the people who were playing the game. Will Rayman Raving Rabbids destroy players' couches?

Mwahahahaha...

Your Introduction for Rayman Raving Rabbids at E3 was interrupted by a vicious rabbit attack. You didn't get to reveal the game's biggest feature. What is it and how does it work?

The Rabbids have come in force, they are extremely vicious but at the same time, they are totally stupid. The game is very story driven but the player will experience a lot of combinations of game-play before succeeding to stop the rabbits' invasion and "Jabba Rabbit". For example, you will need to perform exceptionally well in a number of gladiator style trials in order to gain in popularity with the bunnies, under the evil rule of "Jabba Rabbit". The better you entertain the crowds the more gifts they will send you and worlds you will unlock.

In terms of the biggest feature, you will not have your couch blown apart by a huge robotic rabbit, but I suppose anything is possible with these bunnies, the game will have very unique games that will really push the skills of the players, in particular when using the Wii controller.

Bunnies seem to be the game's most prevalent antagonist, but what do they do in the game that makes them so evil?
I would say taking over the world and enslaving Rayman and all his friends is fairly unfriendly, not to mention attacking



him with various plungers and fly swatters and generally trying to ridicule him is pretty mean!

What sort of methods or weapons do the bunnies use to attack Rayman?
Let me see, plungers are their weapon of choice, but they also like to play around with feather dusters, fly swatters, shovels, colanders, and much more...
Bunnies will come from the ground, the air and even the water so be careful and keep your eyes wide open, as sometimes they might be well disguised...

Dancing seems to be a major part of Rayman Raving Rabbids. What purpose does dancing serve in the game?
This is another way you can defeat the bunnies, basically as you are performing and "grooving" bunnies will come and attack you. You will need to keep the rhythm and use your best disco moves to fight them off. More on busting a move a bit later...

Rayman will also be able to tame and ride various creatures. Will the tame creatures serve as allies fighting alongside Rayman? Or is their function simply to transport the hero from place to place?
Creatures will be used by Rayman to race and compete against the bunnies in various trials.

Will Rayman's allies such as Globox and Murfy appear in Rabbids? What parts will they play?
They have been kidnapped so none just yet.

Please explain how costumes will be used in Rabbids.
Rayman will go trough a series of trials and if he does well, he will get gifts and presents from the bunnies who will start to like him. Those gifts include music to unlock in your jukebox, plungers and trophies to decorate your cell...and of course the costumes, one of the biggest rewards.

We will have more than 10 of them including Disco, Hip Hop, Punk style and other funny ones I can't talk about just yet...

How will Rayman Raving Rabbids make use of the Nintendo Wii controller? What sort of in-game actions will require use of the controller, and what specific motions will be used to perform these actions?
We have developed new control features that were shown in our trailer at E3 but we don't want to tell you too much just yet!!!

Ray's movements: with the nunchuck and remote you can move Rayman... jumping, rolling and sky diving. You will also be able to use the FPS view to shoot bunnies.
Fighting: this part is very different from what you are used to: the Wii controller (remote part) allows us to create deep interaction between Rayman and the player. If you give a real punch move, Rayman makes the same punch on screen: i.e. you make a punch from right to left, Rayman does the same move from right to left. If you shake the controller, Rayman will do some special kung-fu style moves. Hi-ah!

Grappling: If you make a quick move with the nunchuck, Rayman will grapple the nearest enemies/objects. You can then make them spin around Rayman with the remote and throw them (as projectiles) just by swinging the controller around your head. This is also used when you do the Cow Toss. Basically you swing the cow around your head and see how far you can throw her.....mooooooooo!

These controls are very easy to learn because both of your hands directly control Rayman's hands we have kept it as a natural extension of Ray's hands.

Rayman will also be able to use creatures in the game. To ride them, you have to twist the Wii controller in order to direct the creatures in certain ways. You can imagine that it feels very natural to control an eagle in the air, just by moving your hands in the direction you want to go.

Last but not least: You will be able to dance with the bunnies by keeping the beat!

This Rayman game has been described as an action adventure. Was there any trepidation in moving the series away from its platforming origins?
As I mentioned earlier we wanted to make something that was very different and focus on the absurdity that this world of invading bunnies allowed us to do. So the traditional platforming side of things has changed slightly and we have given many new styles of gameplay and trials to let the player experience. This was also a design choice particularly to maximize the different uses of the Wii controller which opened loads of new avenues in terms of immersion for the player.

How does the fighting work in Rabbids? And how much of the game consists of Rayman beating up enemies?
There are many different challenges that Rayman must face including shooting







Hard time in the bunny lock-up.

"Basically you swing the cow around your head and see how far you can throw her..... mooooooo!"

Adrian Lacey





Rayman lets his funk flag fly.

bunnies with plungers, shutting toilet doors, sky diving and of course facing off against loads of psycho bunnies in some serious beat'em up action. The game really focuses on diverse actions for Rayman as the Wii controller translates into Rayman's actual hand actions and applied to many different styles of gameplay that are hysterical.

Rayman games have always featured beautiful and otherworldly environments. Can you tell us what goes into their creation, omitting no earthly detail?
Time, photos, late nights, sketches, more time, more late nights.

How do you think Rayman has evolved as a game character?
As most game characters he gained experience and fame during his various adventures.
However, the particularity of Rayman is that he is still a lighthearted, accessible and generally a funky character...but whatever he does, it seems he will never get his arms and legs back...hence why now he has started wearing long trousers.

It seems natural Rabbids would feature online Rabbids vs. Rayman play. Will the game feature any online component? If it will, what sort of modes will be available online?
We're still waiting for more information but have some crazy ideas that we are testing!

What's the one thing everyone should know about Rayman?
He's a lean mean bunny beating machine!

The videos promoting the game are all very very funny. How funny is Rayman Raving Rabbids? And can you give us examples of the game's humorous moments?
Besides the more in depth mission trials, there are several mini trials which are hysterical, such as closing the doors to the toilets before the bunnies throw plungers at your head or pulling worms out of a bunnies mouth. These are just fun to play particularly when you have to hook a worm with the "remote" of the Wii and then drag the worm out of his mouth!



While we're on gameplay specifics, can you briefly walk us through one of the game's levels or missions?
In single player, Rayman is locked in his cell. He may either choose to continue on his quest by selecting the exit door or else rabbits will come and grab him to take him to the main arena. He will then come face to face with the Jabba Rabbit, emperor of the Rabbits, and face 5 doors corresponding to the 5 challenges to be carried out on that day, in order to pursue his quest and increase in popularity. This will then take him to the area where the trials take place, for example a tropical island or a Western style town.

Is there anything we missed? Or anything you'd care to add?
AAAAARRRRGH!

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Grid based Maps

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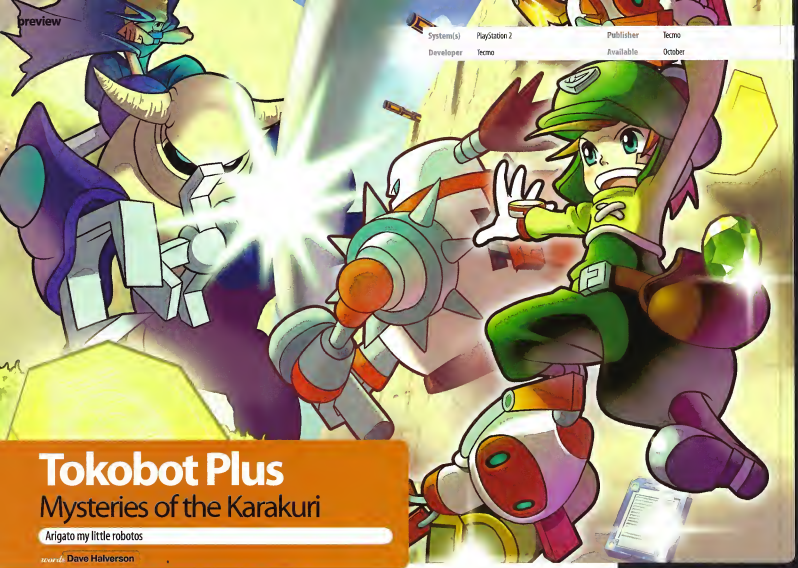
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PlayStation.Portable

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System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Tecmo
Developer	Tecmo	Available	October

Tokobot Plus

Mysteries of the Karakuri

Arigato my little robotos

words Dave Halverson

In this industry we tend to throw around the terms "gameplay" and "play mechanics" like they're fastened to every game on the assembly line like front bumpers. But such is not the case. In their simplest form they can be simply walking, jumping, kicking and punching, and if done right that used to be enough… but such games are considered relics of an era gone by, replaced by 10-button controllers and schematics to navigate menu screens. It's been a long time since anybody came up with anything so fun and intuitive that instead of slobbering over the 10-million-dollar effects you're too busy having fun to care. The original Ape Escape and Viewtiful Joe were such games, and new and improved for 2007, so is Tokobot Plus, the follow-up to our 2006 PSP game of the year.

Tokobots are a treasure hunter's best friend. Agent Bolt begins with six to use as ladders, bridges, weapons, and switches on his way to discovering ruins and, subsequently, more and more Tokobots for the increasingly clever and tricky challenges ahead, a fusion of action and puzzle solving seldom seen in a pure action format. Tank, propeller, catapult, robot…there' s no end to the Tokobots' formations, but it's up to you to know what to use, when, and how. The canvas for this odd slice of futuristic life revolves around an excavation and subsequent development that would make Al Gore cry, via an anime-style lab where Bolt's support group works on intelligence and provides him with valuable upgrades and information: A lot like Ape Escape's lab, only wonderfully hand-drawn and not nearly as cheeky (thankfully). Tokobot adopts the anime/manga style, however it's anything but fruity. The villains are sharp-witted and plenty devious, more like Wario than, say, a cheeky monkey, and Bolt is an awesomely designed character who controls with total precision. It's Tecmo; they don't do it any other way, ever.

What looks and plays exactly like a giant PSP version of the original at first is more than meets the no-longer-squinting eye. *Plus* features 10 new stages exclusive to and designed for the PS2, along with new combo attacks, an upgrade system that lets you spend earned points on more powerful combos and attacks (and the ever-traditional elongating of the life bar) enemy attack absorption to turn the tables, and a new time-attack mode. If you missed it on PSP, run, don't walk, to hook one up, and if you didn't, walk briskly, there's a lot of new meat on these tasty bones. **play**

> "Bolt is an awesomely designed character who controls with total precision."





95 out of 100 – Game Informer
"PC and Console Game of the Month"

9.0 out of 10 – IGN
"An excellent, deep first-person shooter experience unrivaled on Xbox 360"

4.75 out of 5 – GamePro
"Surpasses all expectations to become one of the best games of the year"

9.0 out of 10 – Official Xbox Magazine
"Consistently impressive and rousingly fun in a way that you just shouldn't miss"

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System(s)	Xbox 360/PC	Publisher	Atari	Available	September
Developer	Eden Games	Online/Multi	MMO	ESRB Rating	T



Test Drive Unlimited

words Greg Orlando

Pedal to the medal of honor ...



That's a Jeff, truly a thing of beauty.



The scenic splendor and near-unspoiled beauty of Hawaii—Oahu, to be exact— serves as the setting for Test Drive Unlimited's freeform, do-as-thou-wilt play. As a new arrival to the state (players choose their character from a preset roster standing on line to board a plane for the ride across the Pacific), drivers are encouraged to go forth, explore, and race. In other words, the streets are yours, kid. Just watch out for the cops.

Atari refers to Test Drive Unlimited's play as M.O.O.R., or massively open online racing. Thousands via Xbox 360 Live can prowl the streets of Hawaii, and players will be able to form racing teams, set their own challenges and establish race routes via a waypoint system, race in 8-car competitions, and offer prize monies for the winner. And for those who want to patrol Hawaii's highways and byways without Xbox 360 Live, Unlimited presents suitable time-based challenges, races, and missions.

Unlimited presents players with the opportunity to create a lifestyle for their selected driver. Real estate can be bought and sold; a player's house becomes a repository for any cars purchased, as well as a place to showcase various trophies and awards. Characters' appearances can be modified within the confines of their houses, and clothes can be changed to reflect the fickle hand of fashion. Similarly, car dealers offer new vehicles for sale or rent—with rentals providing an easy way for players to enter races with particular vehicle prerequisites without doling out a huge sum to purchase a car. Unlimited offers approximately 125 cars and motorcycles, including models from Saturn, Mercedes, Jaguar, Lamborghini, Ducati, Ford, and Aston Martin.

"In other words, the streets are yours, kid. Just watch out for the cops."

All of the game's cars can be customized with new parts and paintjobs. Atari's touting realism here, so all the cars' engines produce authentic purrs and hums, and their horns sound identical to their real-world counterparts. It may be a tad excessive, but the realism should appeal to diehard car enthusiasts.

Atari has built an automotive playground that's exceedingly easy for players to get around in. A comprehensive map makes navigating this island paradise simple. Players can use the map to filter out specific destinations such as stores (clothing, cars), real estate agencies, and race markers. During challenges and races, the game barks out directions to players so they can concentrate on the race itself rather than looking at a map to find the next waypoint.

Ultimately, a driving game lives or dies based on the strength of its car physics. A preview version for Unlimited offered a great variation in its cars; some tended to careen wildly at the slightest turn while others held the road with tenacity. It seems there's some truth to Atari's claim that it's nailed the individual handling characteristics of the cars, but certainly, the final product has yet to be tested. **play**

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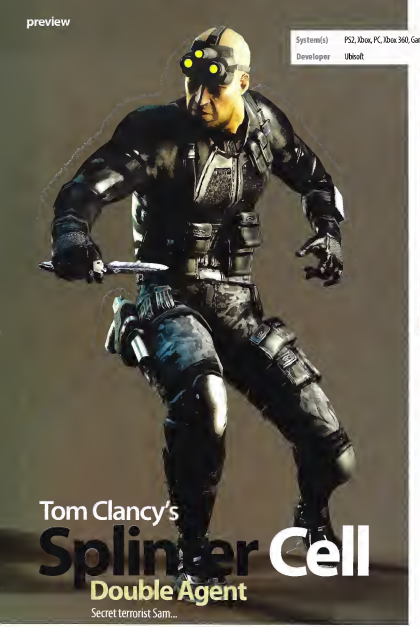
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System(s)	PS2, Xbox, PC, Xbox 360, GameCube	Publisher	Ubisoft	Available	September
Developer	Ubisoft	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	M

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell

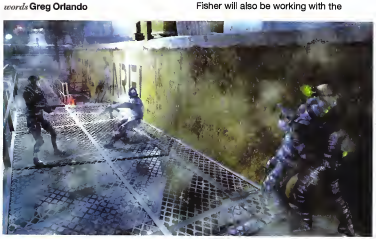
Double Agent

Secret terrorist Sam...

words **Greg Orlando**

The JBA—or John Brown's Army—is on the move. It's about to launch an insidious plan to nuke three cities in the United States in one, devastating strike, and new recruit Sam Fisher seems to be actively helping them doing it.

Fisher has gone terrorist in Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Double Agent, but all is certainly not what it seems; Fisher will also be working with the NSA (National Security Agency) to stop the JBA. This sets up one of Double Agent's most intriguing features, the need to balance two very different sets of objectives. An in-game trust meter notes how far Fisher has gone in terms of pleasing his dual masters—but if the meter swings to one end or the other, there's a real problem. Support from NSA is dependent on Fisher acting in concert with the government's needs and the terrorists, well, they won't think much of plugging someone they can't trust.





> "Where the bullet hits, of course, has a great impact on how the game progresses..."

Players will be forced to make tough choices in Agent. Once Fisher meets up with the JBA, he'll be asked to shoot a bound prisoner. In this cut-scene like moment (Ubisoft calls them "directed moments"), players are in control of the aiming and firing. Where the bullet hits, of course, has a great impact on how the game progresses. Choices lead to consequences, and Ubisoft has made it known that major players in Agent can and will die—and it's possible that players' choices will lead to such in-game catastrophes as the death of millions of innocents.

Ubisoft wasn't content to rest with forcing players to take an active role in the way the game's plot shapes up, however. For Agent, Ubisoft has added new tools and maneuvers for Fisher (he can punch through some ice walls and cut wires), increased the number of players in the game's spies vs. mercenaries online competitions to a total of six, and added exclusive content for each of the game's platforms. Agent for the Xbox 360, for example, holds two single-player levels not found in the game's other versions. The PlayStation 2 edition contains two special flashback missions, an exclusive solo mission, and eight minutes of new cut-scenes.

As always, stealth-based play is the order of the day for Fisher. Some missions will have the grizzled protagonist (once again voiced by actor Michael Ironside) working in conjunction with a partner, or skulking in the shadows without the use of his special night- and other crazy kinds of vision glasses. Other locations—found on the PC and Xbox 360 iterations—will feature Fisher fighting amid snow- and sandstorms.

Online play, even in a brief playtest on the Xbox 360, proved to be a wonderful distraction from Agent's somber single-player adventure. In the game's spies vs. mercenaries mode, the spies are now able to hack any console within their line of sight, with the proviso being that the closer the spy is to his target, the quicker the hack. Spies can also use their hacking tool to disrupt an environment's power system, or even disrupt a mercenary's electronics. To balance things out, mercenaries now have a motion sensor to detect a spy's movements.

Sometimes, it's very good to be very bad. Fisher turns rogue in September, which means bad news for the terrorists and, hopefully, great news for fans of Splinter Cell. **play**



Random inmate admires sweet normal mapping.









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System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Sierra
Developer	Krome Studios	Available	October

The Legend of Spyro
A New Beginning

If it's broke, fix it



words Dave Halverson

If there's one thing that The Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning belches from the highest mountain, it's never say die. This was a franchise in near ruin after transitioning from Insomniac to Universal where it (and we) was forced to endure an onslaught of polygonally challenged pastel worlds, scampering about ramming invaders and making friends with characters that make Bambi look like a hammer troll. What had begun as a platforming star poised for greatness fizzled the day Spyro left home. I figured the obligatory last nail in the coffin (kart racer) was all that was left before Spyro's flame finally flickered out.

But then Sierra did the unexpected and actually had the good sense to dial up the Aussies at Krome Studios, home of Ty Tiger, to resuscitate our once precocious purple pal. Krome's answer? Stick a fork in the old and in with the new. Suck the cuteness out and spread the evil, along with a dose of Gilliam-esque fantasy and just a hint of wit, courtesy of David Spade who plays Sparks to Elijah Wood's Spyro. Still more acting muscle comes by way of the evil, world-torching, dragon-slaying hell beast, Cinder, played by the esteemed Gary Oldman. I'd have a "when hell freezes over" retort here but it appears that it's already merged with SoCal.

"Krome's answer? Stick a fork in the old and in with the new. Suck the cuteness out and spread the evil."

The story begins anew, at the twilight of Spyro's life. Still in the egg, like Moses











Elijah the dragon



Elijah Wood plays a great Spyro, but beware of Frodo Baggins flashbacks.



to the Nile, Spyro's egg is set a drift just as Cinder's dark army attacks the sacred temple looking for the legendary purple dragon egg said to be hatched only once every ten generations (shades of both Willow and the Old Testament – pretty heavy for a dragon tale). Discovered and adopted by a family of dragon flies, it isn't until Spyro discovers he's adopted (gee, yah think) that he ventures out and discovers his sole ancestor not caught in Cinder's net; Ignitus, the very elder that set him free.

From here (post training) it's all platforming and melee action the likes that Spyro has never even rubbed up against: Air juggles and combos, flaming supers, fire like you never dreamt he could spit (or the PS2 could do), aerial attacks...and enemies vicious enough to wash it all down without Teletubbies flashbacks. Baboon-like henchman fly in on giant mutant bats, skeletal specters swing massive hatchets with ill intent, and gaunt dragons drop explosives from the sky. Thankfully, the level design follows suit. If I had to drift across one more sherbet field I might have sued. There's plenty of clever platforming to be had in A New Beginning, and Cinder's dark armies don't play that token enemy game. Rather, they're keen on setting up gauntlets and sending out hordes of lesser minions, followed by beast-riders and heavy artillery for Spyro to shake off before launching a counter attack, using catapults, and hurling projectile fireballs. Also gone are the dopey flying stages replaced by Krome's version of Spyro Dragoon. As for the bosses, all I'll say is that they're XXL, and hard to kill.

What's large, orb-like, purple and fancy's dragon stew?

Don't get me wrong, A New Beginning isn't hardcore dark (Spade makes sure of that) but for a Spyro game it is like Rob Zombie covering Amy Grant. So throw all of those old Spyro games on the fire, light up that lovely PS2 and say hello to Spyro all over again.



"...New Beginning isn't hardcore dark (Spade makes sure of that), but for a Spyro game it is like Rob Zombie covering Amy Grant."

System(s)	Xbox, PlayStation 2	Publisher	THQ
Developer	Pandemic Studios	Available	October



Destroy All Humans! 2

Make War Not Love

It came from the '60s...

words Greg Orlando









Remember when mean old Mr. Burns commented that hippies' flower power was no match for his glower power? Well, glower power is no match for the Zap-o-Matic gun as used by homicidal alien Crypto-138.

Destroy All Humans! 2: Make War Not Love propels Crypto into the turbulent and oftentimes patently absurd 1960s. With the Russians hot on his heels, Crypto and his now-dead ally Orthopox—in the form of a hologram— have to travel around the globe doing what they do best: wreaking havoc and destroying all humans.

This time around, Pandemic has done away with holobob technology that allowed Crypto to appear human. Now, the alien can simply hijack human bodies and use them as he will. The disguise, however, isn't complete if he's seen possessing a body; any witnesses must be dispatched with rays of free love, which causes the stricken humans to dance and forget what they've seen. New weapons such as the dislocator, an energy projectile that hurls targets around wildly; the gastro gun, which causes humans to expand and explode; and the meteor strike provide wonderful opportunities for both hilarity and mischief. In addition, Crypto will also be able to access a lot of his old powers such as telekinesis and the ability to scan human brains for information.

The game begins in Bay City, with players running around Golden Gate Park, Hasbury, and The Wharf attempting to track down Coyote Bongwater, a hippie who's attempting to start a revolution via a drug called Revelade. Introductory missions have Crypto recovering new weapons, hijacking bodies, seeking information from the local informant, and recovering repair pods in order to fix a spaceship. Once the spaceship is restored, players can take to the air, using a death ray to shoot down blimps spraying Revelade into the atmosphere.

As was the case with the first game, there's a lot of good humor to be had. When Crypto tracks down the Bongwater's girlfriend, she's giving a speech on how the "Age of Aquariums" is here. "A lot of you have joined the ALF to get back at your rich parents," she muses, "who've subjected you to obscene amounts of luxury!"

Players can also expect cooperative play to be added to the game's final version, as well as a gene blender feature which enables Crypto to mix and match the DNA he steals from people all across the world. And he'll be traveling a lot, too, as the game includes not only a faux San Francisco, but also reworked versions of Japan, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain. And, while this love isn't free, it certainly promises to be pretty darn fun. play

Spanning the globe, spreading destruction

"Pandemic has done away with holobob technology that allowed Crypto to appear human. Now, the alien can simply hijack human bodies..."

System(s)	PlayStation 2, PC, Xbox 360	Publisher	Sega	Available	October 24
Developer	Sonic Team	Online/Multi	Yes	ESRB Rating	T

PhantasyStar Universe

We're fighting the Rappies there so we don't have to fight them here

words **Casey Loe**

Online games rarely make for good offline experiences, but Sega is determined to change that with Phantasy Star Universe. In addition to the proper online sequel Phantasy Star Online fans have been clamoring for, Sonic Team has scripted a 40-hour offline quest that digs deeply into the culture and history of the game's new Gurahl planetary system.

The story stars Ethan Waber, a hotheaded teen who decides to join the private Guardians police force after mysterious, alien-infested asteroids begin crashing near the ruins of a lost civilization. The tale is told through anime-style episodes of about two hours in length, each complete with a theme-song opening and a "next time on Phantasy Star Universe" teaser at the end. The bulk of each episode is spent in dungeon crawls that use the same basic engine, monsters, and areas as the online mode, but are packed with fully-voiced event scenes and a large cast of NPC partners and villains. The episodic structure doesn't allow for too much exploration, but players are free to pursue side missions in already-visited areas, or hit the shops in a number of beautifully rendered cities. It's unfortunate that you can't create your own hero, but the game does offer several ways to personalize Ethan. You can switch between Hunter, Force and Ranger classes between missions, and buy new duds or get a makeover at one of the game's numerous malls. If only there was a mall with an "attitude shop" where Ethan could buy a likeable personality!

While the Story Mode is a good time all by itself, the experience has left us drooling in anticipation of online play. That wasn't possible with our preview version of the game, but our dungeon forays in Story Mode suggest that Phantasy Star





Ethan Waber waves his saber.



"While the Story Mode is a good time all by itself, the experience has left us drooling in anticipation of online play."



XXL bosses have become a staple of the series.

Universe's enhanced engine has overcome most of its predecessor's shortcoming. Combat is fast-paced and tight, with the clunky weak/strong/special weapon attacks replaced with zippy combos and flashy special moves that sweep in wide arcs and juggle foes. The new action palette allows you to preset several weapon combinations and switch between them on the fly. It's a great system for Hunters and Rangers who can now switch from saber swings to handgun blasts by holding the R1 Button, but it sucks for Forces, who will have to constantly rotate through an inventory full of wands that are capped at two techniques apiece. (Hopefully the old PSO technique menu will be back online, and this is merely one of Ethan's many personal shortcomings.)

Phantasy Star Online's most obvious failing was a lack of content; if they had tried to stitch its five areas and 20-or-so enemies into an offline RPG it probably would have been about four hours long. But Phantasy Star Universe has over 70 distinct enemy species, over 20 different environments, and a variety of vehicles and mounts to break up the action. There's even some simple RPG puzzle-solving, in which players can equip goggles to reveal invisible foes and find structural weaknesses in objects. Samus would be proud.

With super-bright settings and a campy, juvenile tone, Phantasy Star Universe's Story Mode isn't exactly a return to the moody RPG drama of old-school Phantasy Star titles, but it is clear that Sonic Team put a great deal of time and effort into the story and presentation. I can't imagine too many Phantasy Star Universe buyers will be spending their time offline when they could be questing with friends, but one thing's for sure: PSU's Story Mode is going to make server downtime a hell of a lot more fun than it used to be. **play**





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magazine **playONLINE**





Art: Keron Grant

Best-of series Part 1

PLATFORMERS

The Platformer: any game where jumping mechanics are key, combined with pattern-based obstacles, various attack mechanisms and, of course, bosses, involving either bipedal talking animals, humans and/or hominids.

Dave Halverson

modus operandi

The Butt Bounce

The preferred method of attack, although assorted blunt instruments, projectiles, torture, and various forms of martial arts are also acceptable.

Grappling

The act of shooting an apparatus onto a ceiling or grid for swinging or moving while hanging.

The Double-Jump

Whether standard or earned--a requisite maneuver.

Collecting

Platforming's version of OCD. They live to collect and often only know where to go by the trail of indigenous sparkly things or food.

Idles

What they do when they're bored; the ruder the better.

Hubs

A mid-to-large expanse where they live, usually attached to warps or trails leading to places they shouldn't go.

Crates and Various Receptacles

Here you'll find freshly prepared meals, or fruit and other consumables.

Damsels in Distress

The sure-fire way to get many a platforming star's attention. Steal their girl; run to the end of the game and wait. Eventually he, she, or it will arrive to save the day, followed by a cheap-ass ending.

World domination or destruction

99% of what the bad guys that make it all possible are vying for.

There are 60 console games on this spread, all of which represent the single most important aspect of the gaming experience: Fun. Through inspired character design, inventive gameplay, and indelible soundtracks, platformers have been a key ingredient in molding the industry we know today, even though mascots and pack-ins are now relics of the past.

Top 25 3D

1. **Psychonauts** - Xbox/Double Fine
2. **Super Mario 64 and Sunshine** - N64/GameCube/Nintendo
3. **Banjo Kazooie and Banjo-Toole** – N64/Rare
4. **Crash Bandicoot** - PS/Naughty Dog
5. **Ratchet & Clank, R&C Going Commando and UYA** – PS2/Insomniac
6. **Maximo: Ghosts to Glory and vs. Army of Zin** - PS2/Capcom
7. **Jak and Daxter** - PS2/Naughty Dog
8. **Blinx and Blinx 2** - Xbox/Artoon
9. **Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus, Band of Thieves and Honor Among Thieves** – PS2/Sucker Punch
10. **Jet Set Radio Future** – Xbox/Smilebit
11. **Rayman 2: The Great Escape** - Dreamcast/Ubisoft Montreal
12. **Voodoo Vince** – Xbox/Beep Industries
13. **Kameo: Elements of Power** – Xbox 360/Rare
14. **Conker Live and Reloaded** – Xbox/Rare
15. **BUG** - Saturn/Sega
16. **Wario World** – GC/Treasure
17. **Tork** - Xbox/Tiwak
18. **Legend of Kay** - PS2/Neon Studios
19. **Fur Fighters** - PS2, DC/Bizarre Creations
20. **The Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning** PS2 Krome
21. **Billy Hatcher** - PS2/Sonic Team
22. **Medieval** - PS/Cambridge Studios
23. **Prince of Persia SNES and The Sands of Time** - SNES/Xbox Konami/Ubisoft Montreal Studios
24. **Jumping Flash** - PS/Sony
25. **Wild 9** – PS/Shiny

Top 25 2D

1. **Super Mario World, and SMW2 Yoshi's Island** - SNES/ Nintendo
2. **Super Castlevania IV, Bloodlines and SotN** – SNES/Genesis/PS
3. **Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts** – SNES Capcom
4. **Viewtiful Joe and Viewtiful Joe 2** – PS2/Capcom
5. **Gunstar Heroes** – Genesis/Treasure
6. **Earthworm Jim** – Genesis/Shiny Ent.
7. **Astal** - Saturn/Sega
8. **Sonic the Hedgehog & Import Sonic CD** – Genesis/Sega CD/Sonic Team
9. **Donkey Kong Country 1, 2 & 3** - SNES/Rare
10. **Clockwork Knight (1&2)** – Saturn/Sega
11. **Mischief Makers** – N64/Treasure
12. **Dynamite Headdy** - Genesis/Treasure
13. **Silhouette Mirage** – Saturn/Treasure
14. **Magician Lord** – Neo-Geo/SNK
15. **Super Star Wars** - SNES/LucasArts
16. **WonderDog** - Sega CD/Core
17. **Rayman** - Jaguar/Ubisoft
18. **Act Raiser** - SNES/Enix
19. **Wonder Boy in Monster World & Monster World IV** –Genesis/Sega
20. **Skullmonkeys** – PS/Neverhood
21. **Flink CD** - Sega CD/Psygnosis
22. **Strider & Strider 2**– Genesis/PS Capcom
23. **Revenge of Shinobi** – Genesis/Sega
24. **Bonk's Adventure** –TG16/Hudson
25. **Mickey Mania** –Sega CD/Sony Imagesoft

Top 10 8-bit

1. **Ghosts 'n Goblins** - NES/Capcom
2. **Kid Icarus** - NES/Nintendo
3. **Super Mario Bros. 1, 2 & 3** - NES/Nintendo
4. **Wizards and Warriors** - NES/Rare
5. **Batman and Batman Return of the Joker** - NES/Sunsoft
6. **Battletoads** - NES/Rare
7. **Bionic Commando** - NES/Capcom
8. **Ninja Gaiden** - NES/Tecmo
9. **Mega Man and MM 2** - NES/Capcom
10. **Rygar** - NES/Tecmo

coming soon

We won't stop until we get to the very bottom of the pile... Help us choose what comes next at letters@playmagazine.com

SHOOTERS
FIGHTING
ROLE-PLAYING

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	THQ	Available	September
Developer	Volition	Online/Multi	Yes	ESRB Rating	M

Saint's Row

It's hard out here for a pimp...hitman, drug-dealer, thief...

words **Dave Halverson**

In some capacity we all dream of ruling the streets, be them urban or metropolitan—of being an invincible force immune to the consequences of our actions. If only life had a reset button.

I suppose we owe a debt of gratitude to Rockstar for opening that door. Although not a huge fan of the GTA series, I find myself a huge fan of the archetype. With Mercenaries, Jak 2 and 3, Assassins Creed, Just Cause, Crackdown, and now Saint's Row, open-world gaming has quickly become my go-to category after platforming, although Saint's Row is an especially unorthodox entrée for my gaming palate. As a card-carrying anti-thug advocate it's the last game I expected to fall in love with yet here I am one hundred percent immersed in my own private struggle to clean up the streets, pretty much however I see fit.

At the heart of Saint's Row are its activities, which earn you the respect needed to open the game's core missions. How you go about earning that respect is up to you and it's here that I find the game most intriguing. I recruit my own homies and go my own way. When the Saints come calling I'm good to go, but otherwise I'm a free agent dressed my way, doing my thing, with my character, who happens to be an Asian muscle head with a mad sense of style, a tasteful tapestry of tattoos, and one sick haircut.

The overall gist of Saint's Row is to take back the streets, and then keep 'em clean by systematically eradicating the Los Carnales, West Side Rollerz, and the



"The nature of the game's free-form design coupled with its devices also make it an extremely personal experience."

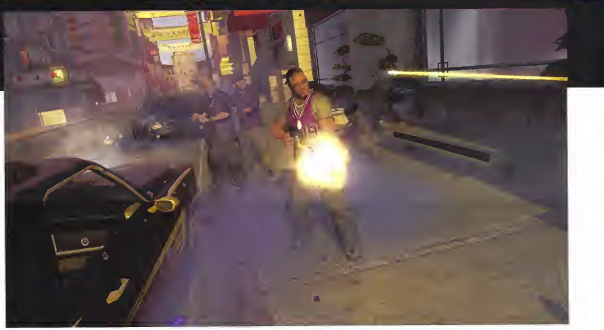
He'll need more than that to dine at Freckle Bitches.





Vice Kings before moving onto the man himself, Benjamin King. Working within the Saints' three factions you move about the game through missions that help each decimate their designated gang, and then by doing your own thing in between. Pimp, run drugs, hijack, race, insurance fraud, hit-man…it's a big city with big city needs, and payola. You get a crib, a garage to fill with choice rides, and money to spend as you see fit on clothes, tattoos, firearms, tuning, and other possessions as the saga unfolds. Major milestones include gaining control of neighborhoods and then keeping them clean. The Saints will provide back up when the occasional flare up occurs, however, ultimately, all of the game's activities and "pushbacks" focus on mastering different aspects of the game, yet another area where Saints' excels. For an open-world game, the AI is remarkable. Whether you're racing, taking over a hood, out on a hit or whatever, the gameplay takes center stage. Only through mastery of your available weapons and ammo, vehicles, movement, and surroundings will you besiege the higher ranks of the game, which are about as intense as anything in the genre in terms of balls-out action and racing. The nature of the game's free-form design coupled with its devices also make it an extremely personal experience, more so than any of its predecessors. Hopping on the freeway to get where you're going becomes as commonplace as shopping at your favorite stores and choosing your car of choice. Playing Saint's is a lot like moving to a new town.





It's also quite beautiful (in its own gritty way). Ancillary models are surprisingly detailed given the acreage on display—during the Mayhem Activity in the Barrio District of Cecil Park, take a minute to watch the dancing—the cut-scenes are gorgeous, load times are practically non-existent, and the integrity of the architecture as you pass from hood to hood is remarkable. Volition has certainly raised the bar in terms of open-world urban visuals and gameplay. One can only imagine how spectacular a sequel will be providing the game performs at retail, which is pretty much assured unless bustling urban sprawls and seamless story integration suddenly fall out of vogue. Don't look for it anytime soon though. To give you an idea of how long Saints took to develop, the gas station by Freckle Bitches (the local fast food chain)



"Hopping on the freeway to get where you're going becomes as commonplace as shopping at your favorite stores..."

is selling regular at 1.64 a gallon.

I'd have loved bikes and a female character option (although Aisha provides ample eye candy) but otherwise Saint's Row is all I'd hoped and more. Since we last visited the game, Volition has buttoned it up better than promised, and balanced it for maximum addiction. This is living…in the fast lane…dodging bullets…with hoes in back seat. **play**

Saint's Row

SCORE 9.0

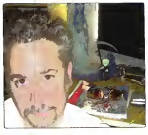
+	Great gameplay, superb open-world visuals, great acting, story and radio stations.
–	No bikes or mopeds or choice of genders, a few moments of pop-up/graphics dropping out.

Reviews

September 2006

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Staff "Round-up"



Dave Halverson

Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D action
Now playing: Okami, Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning
Top 2 platformers all-time: Psychonauts, Crash Bandicoot

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood, E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by-day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.



Nick Des Barres

Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: Gurumin, Brave Story, Senhio no Ronde Rev.X
Top 2 platformers all-time: Super Mario 64, Super Mario Bros. 3

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.



Brady Fiechter

Executive Editor

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPG
Now playing: The Darkness, Prey
Top 2 platformers all-time: Mario 64, Super Castlevania IV

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thao-ist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.



Casey Loe

Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: Yakuza, Oni/Tatakae! Ouendan!
Top 2 platformers all-time: Wonder Boy in Monster Land, Super Mario Bros. 3

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VII ultimately left him incompre-hensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.



Greg Orlando

Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Dead Rising, Yakuza
Top 2 platformers all-time: Oddworld Abe's Oddysee, Super Mario 64

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: if the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Eric Patterson

Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: SWAT: Desert Strike, Space Invaders Extreme
Top 2 platformers all-time: Sonic, the Hedgehog, Kairo Yurei-tokai Ketsugidan (Sakura)

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

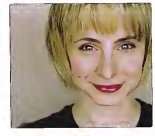


Mike Griffin

PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Call of Juarez, Ill Matador, Guild Wars
Top 2 platformers all-time: Mario 64 (changed everything), Klonoa 2 (best-ever mechanics and colorful characters)

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



Heather Campbell

Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: Sonic Gems, Halo 2
Top 2 platformers all-time: Mario 64, Sonic CD

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grind-ing, if someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Axtec Adven-ture, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.



Dead Rising

p.55

Capcom holds the patent on making the virtual dead so very fun to fiddle with. Dead Rising takes the entire business to the next level with more zombies, and more ways to kill 'em.

Our rating system

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game is the best, a modern classic.

10. **Perfect**
9. **Extraordinary**
8. **Great**
7. **Good**
6. **Decent**
5. **Average**
4. **Below average**
3. **Poor**
2. **Bad**
1. **Terrible**



Castle Crashers

System(s)	Xbox 360 Live Arcade	Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	the Behemoth	Available	Q1 2007

The masters of side-scrolling at The Behemoth are set to unleash their 2D power once again, this time on Xbox 360 Live Arcade, with Castle Crashers--a 1-4 player hack, slash, and smash action extravaganza that stopped us dead in our tracks at Comic-Con. Aside from buttery smooth animation, look for expansive environments, RPG-style character evolution, and of course, lotsa funny stuff. ***DH***



Motor Storm



System(s)	PS3	Publisher	SCEA
Developer	Evolution Studios	Available	November

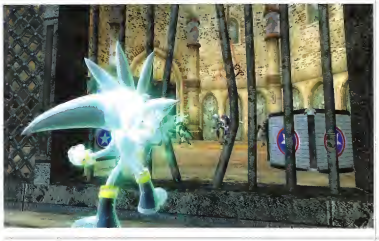
The most recent Motor Storm screens would indicate that it may indeed be everything we'd hoped for; i.e. an off-road racer like no other. No classes, and no rules, in Motor Storm you pick your vehicle--from sand rails, ATVs, motocross bikes, 4x4s, whatever--and hit the track. And what beautiful tracks they are. ***DH***



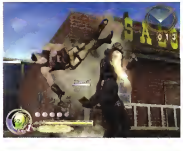
Sonic the Hedgehog

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Sonic Team	Available	November

Here's one last look at Sonic the Hedgehog for 360 and PS3 before we actually bring you some much anticipated hands-on. Black is back on PS3 by the way. Shadow will be a playable character exclusively on the PS3 version which is now set for a simultaneous launch. With any luck this will be the first 3D Sonic that's actually smooth around the edges as well. Give it to me NOW! ***DH***



God Hand





System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Capcom/Clover Studios	Available	October

God Hand (check the arm) is an over-the-top (way over) 3D action clobber fest with hyper-exaggerated combos and a move set you wouldn't bring home to mama. You can kick victims clear into the horizon, or in their privates--wielding ghastly results. Could this be the Capcom beat 'em up we've been waiting for since Final Fight? ***DH***

System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Sega	Available	September
Developer	Amusement Vision	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	M

Yakuza

Like Shenmue, if you replace "forklift-driving" with "brutally violent ass-kicking."

words Casey Loe



Presumably, Yakuza was conceived as little more than an eastern twist on *Grand Theft Auto*. But while *GTA* achieved greatness through its open-ended structure, Yakuza succeeds in the exact opposite way, by delivering the best story-driven gaming experience in recent memory. That isn't to say that the game deprives players of the freedom to pursue subplots, pick fights with strangers and mack on the ladies—merely that the game's central story is so damn compelling that you'll rarely bother to do so.

The script was penned by crime-novelist Seishu Hase, who has succeeded where so many other high-profile writers have failed. Hase (or whoever adapted his story) has mastered the arts of creating plot points that can be experienced instead of being explained, and of working in fight scenes every few minutes without if feeling forced. The tale is deeply complicated, but the hundreds of cut scenes that tell it are short and sweet, and even my ADD-addled attention span never wandered. Sega did a good job with the English voices, although I'm a bit disappointed that they didn't bother to re-synch the lip movements.

You play as Kazuma, a mob enforcer who is released from a decade in prison to find his yakuza clan at the brink of a civil war. Surprisingly, the story has none of the mean-spiritedness that is a hallmark of other games in the genre; Kazuma is brutal in combat, but always up for helping a little girl find her mom. Fortunately, he does everything in the most badass way possible, so even when he's saving abandoned puppies, Kazuma somehow finds a way to create a massive body count.

The game's theme seems to be secret societies, going beyond the fascinating world of organized crime to touch everything from homeless communities to posh, members-only clubs concealed in the unnumbered floors of skyscrapers. At no point will you visit the usual urban-game set pieces—warehouses, junkyards, abandoned factories. Instead, you'll visit a yakuza boss's elaborate funeral, a public park ruled by the homeless, and an abandoned subway station that has been transformed into a playground for the moneyed elite. And if you haven't spent time in Japan, even the mundane host clubs, pachinko parlors and convenience stores have a fascinating touch of the esoteric.

"A long and riveting story, plenty of freedom and a fantastic battle system have earned it a spot on my all-time PlayStation 2 top ten list."

What you'll mostly do in these exotic locations is beat up people. Fortunately, Yakuza has a rich battle system in which you're constantly learning new skills and discovering new weapons to turn against your foes. The "heat" system provides further variety, allowing those who maintain a lively tempo in battle to use context-sensitive special attacks like smashing foes' heads into posts or hurling them over railings. The game gets even nastier when you gain the ability to use your heat gauge with weapons, allowing you to impale foes with umbrellas or wrap bicycles around their heads. If Yakuza could boast of nothing besides its battle system, it would still stand as the finest beat-'em-up ever made.







"...even the mundane host clubs, pachinko parlors and convenience stores have a fascinating touch of the esoteric."





If you tire of pursuing the game's main story, you can participate in scores of side quests, a few of which even have their own event scenes and voiced characters. You can also pursue a number of mini-games, like baccarat and batting-cage baseball, or burn off some tension in a strip club or massage parlor. The sex stuff is more intriguing than it is titillating, but there's plenty of fun to be had buying drinks and presents for cabaret club girls while trying to flirt your way into their pants. With a lot of hard work you can unlock side quests involving your chosen girl, like saving her from a stalker, and then enjoy a date that ends with ESRB-approved, vaguely-implied sex. A lot of the mini-games and side quests are easy to miss on your first play through, and contribute a lot of replay value to an already substantial game.

The game's urban environments are gorgeous, but as you'll learn in the cabaret clubs, beauty doesn't come cheap. Apparently the PS2 can't keep track of more than a single camera angle's worth of this level of detail, so every time the camera shifts there's a second or two of loading time. It doesn't sound like much, but the constant loading makes movement in the city feel extremely choppy. The loading times are even more dreadful when the city's thugs attack—up to 20 seconds in and out of each battle! I wouldn't mind the random encounters otherwise, but having to endure 40 seconds of loading for a 10 second fight can make exploration a chore.

Outside of that, it isn't easy to find fault with Yakuza. A long and riveting story, plenty of freedom and a fantastic battle system have earned it a spot on my all-time PlayStation 2 top ten list. I only hope Sega realizes what they have on their hands, and promptly announce a sequel for a next-generation system that is more capable of handling Yakuza's demanding visuals. **play**

Yakuza

SCORE 9.5

\+ Story, mechanics, and visuals are all top-notch.

\- Loading times suck.



He ate Shenmue for breakfast.

System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Square Enix	Available	September
Developer	Square Enix	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	T

Dirge of Cerberus

Final Fantasy VII

A thoroughly average farewell to FFVII

words Nick Des Barres



Oh Square Enix, why must you play with my heart so? Wasn't Final Fantasy VII better left alone, a moment in time, a seed inserted into the minds of millions of gamers the world over, left to simmer and percolate? Did it need to be dragged kicking and screaming into the light, nine years later? Tetsuya Nomura and Yoshinori Kitase, arguably the most direct authors of the collaborative work that was Final Fantasy VII, certainly seem to think so. And hey, I'm not totally against derivative works based on past Final Fantasies; I liked Advent Children, even with all its editorial flaws. It was very beautiful, and entertaining.

Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII is also very beautiful. How disappointing, then, to learn that the entertainment factor is only mild. Don't get me wrong...DoC is by no means a poor game. It's just not a Final Fantasy-quality game. It was already an absolutely decent product when it came out in Japan the better part of a year ago, and S-E deserves a lot of credit for bringing it more in line with international standard via an extensive refurbish. DoC essentially tries to bridge the gap between Devil May Cry-style third-person action and first-person shooters, but unlike, say, Resident Evil 4, never rises up to be more than the sum of its parts. Control is bizarre (but perfectly workable upon getting used to), enemy lineup feeble, mission objectives bland.

This is why the game is so frustrating. For all its failings in the action department, Dirge nails every other element to the *ground*. Every non-gameplay aspect of the game—the remarkably faithful-to-the-original story, resplendent CG, Tetsuya Nomura character designs so sharp they could cut glass, lush orchestral score by Masashi Hamauzu—is no less than one would expect from a Final Fantasy, and that means "world-class." It is for this reason I score the game as high as 7.5, and do, in fact, recommend it highly to fans of FFVII. It's as simple as this: Final Fantasy means a great story, and Dirge of Cerberus is no exception. You're going to need to experience Vincent's tale of redemption, which in and of itself is great, delightfully extending a character arc which seemingly had nowhere else to go. It may very well be the closest we ever get to an FFVII-2, and if you're able to sort of able to tune the milquetoast gameplay out (or simply look at it as a challenge to be overcome until the next bombastic cutscene) you're going to have a lot of fun. **play**

> "It's as simple as this: Final Fantasy means a great story, and Dirge of Cerberus is no exception."







Vincent takes on one of many formidable bosses.



Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII — SCORE **7.5**

\+ Presentation and design are world-class.

\- Gameplay is not.

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Capcom	Available	August 8
Developer	Capcom	Online/Multi	N/A	ESRB Rating	M

Dead Rising

Everything that rises must converge…

review by **Greg Orlando**



We have met the enemy and he is us." This quote by Walt Kelly rings true even today. No matter how hard Capcom tries to bury Dead Rising's message under layers of blood and gore, it's still woefully apparent. In a mall filled with undead horrors, the true evil lies in the heart of man.

Rising drops photojournalist Frank West into a Colorado mall overrun with the ungrateful dead. He has but 72 hours in hell, time he can use to document the freakshow with his camera, piece together a vast mystery, and rescue beleaguered shopping center patrons.

West is the everyman, a grim and bland protagonist. He comes to this mall not to undo a great evil but rather to photograph it in order to win a Pulitzer prize. From the game's opening scenes, it's clear West is no altruist; he charters a helicopter to fly over the city and begins taking pictures of the carnage. When he spots a man climbing onto his car in an attempt to escape approaching zombies, or sees a woman on a store's roof being surrounded, his instinct is not to make rescue these people, but rather take pictures. The man gets eaten, and Frank gets bonus points if he takes a well-composed and focused shot of it. The woman plunges off the roof to her death, her broken body on the ground below makes for a great shot, too.

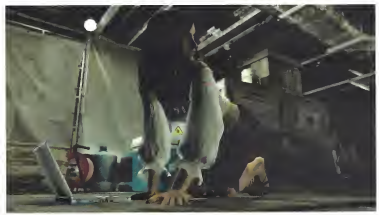
Yet West can be redeemed. He can use his simulated 72 hours to become a hero, fighting through the waves of zombies to rescue people trapped in the mall and then escorting his charges to safety. At times, the rescues will require West to put down his weapons so he can give an injured mother a piggyback ride or have an elderly man lean on his shoulder. The self-serving West who rides in on a chopper need not be the one who escapes after three days' time, and the ability to shape the game's protagonist by picking and choosing specific battles is one of Rising's great draws.

With the freedom to do what he chooses, but only a limited time to do it in, the clock becomes an enemy unto itself. West, via a transceiver, receives news and missions that he can undertake or ignore. Most of these come with strict deadlines. In addition, the game's plot is not static; events occur at regular intervals regardless of whether the protagonist is there to witness them. Miss one piece of the puzzle, and the entirety of the mystery is forever lost. Players will need to make hard choices and, sometimes, people will end up dead as a result.

> "There's a lot going on here, and it extends far beyond Rising's open-ended play."

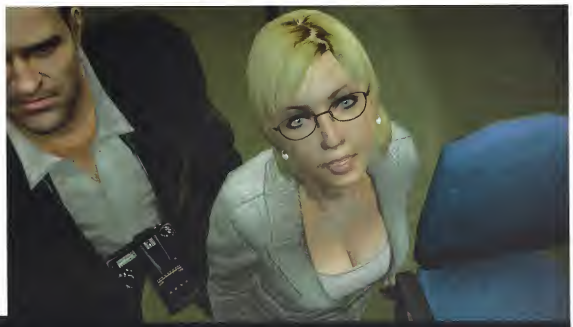
There's a lot going on here, and it extends far beyond Rising's open-ended play, its malleable hero, and its crazy mall wherein West can run around with a Servbot mask on his head while attacking foes with a giant frozen salmon. Some of it is slyly presented and brilliant: a book found in a store allows West to learn Japanese in order to rescue two tourists, both of whom comment on his sanity and lousy speaking ability. More of it is genuinely creepy and cynical. Most of the game's major foes are not zombies at all, but humans who are either insane or outright evil. We have met the enemy …

In many ways, Rising is a spiritual successor to Capcom's Resident Evil. This zombie epic, however, has a brains and a heart to go with its blood and gore. And if this is hell, well, it's oddly heavenly. **play**



Dead Rising — SCORE **9.5**

+	Genuinely creepy; lots to see, do, and kill
−	Escort missions are frustrating; game is exceedingly pessimistic and cynical



Keep your mind on the zombies Frank.

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	From Software	Online/Multi	Vs. battle
		Available	September
		ESRB Rating	Teen

Enchanted Arms

Boldly going where so many RPGs have gone before



Dave Halverson







Atsuma enters unfriendly territory...

Branding an RPG "traditional" used to be like branding water drinkable, until people realized that attacking homogeneous wooden crates and vases was an odd if not implausible way to find remedies, entering people's houses to rout through their cupboards flat rude, and random invisible monster attacks unlikely. But it's just a game right? Right.

The closest thing we have to true "role-playing" games these days are open-world or "sandbox" games like GTA, Mercenaries, and Saint's Row, where you actually live in a pseudo-realistic game space, so thank god Japanese developers are still suspending disbelief, because when it comes to RPGs, games like Enchanted Arms are all I know, and all I care to know. I'm a crate-busting, home-invading, monster-beating, world-saving, effeminately-dressed mo-fo.

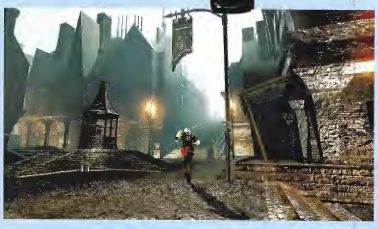
Using Final Fantasy as the archetype (and why not, From does), Enchanted Arms veers into its own territory via Golem Synthesis and collecting—like Pokemon for grown ups, dig it—and its unique take on otherwise dusty old systems. The grid-based, heavily tactical turn-based battles are like a page out of Shining Force only rewritten for added flexibility, HP and VP (Vitality) are refilled automatically after every battle (provided your human party members are rested) negating stopping to heal between battles, and character management is like a hodgepodge of Japanese and American RPGs, assigning parameters via Baldur's, unlocking and learning new skills similar to Kingdom Under Fire, and purchasing items from an inanimate object akin to a closet's worth of traditional console RPGs. The thing is that it all works well enough to give Enchanted Arms its own identity, in league with From's quirky action presets for busting open crates, swimming, and moving platforms; all purely incidental. Also noteworthy is the manner in which the drama plays out, taking animated overlays to the next level by staging key chatter via next-gen in-game renders. The dialogue isn't always Shakespeare but the presentation is certainly welcome. Story is strong too; CG beautiful, and overall visuals, architecture and character design stunning. The music often times just kind of lays there. Although fitting, Enchanted's otherwise limp soundtrack is a testament to the maestros at Square, Sega and the like.

Considering Enchanted Arms—a 50-60-hour-long game developed in under 2 years (evidenced by the repetitive wooden models that populate many a town square)—is the maiden Japanese RPG for the Xbox 360, I think it's safe to assume that we're embarking on a constellation of exciting and beautiful new worlds. This is but the first. **play**

Enchanted Arms SCORE **8.0**

\+ Engaging if not predictable storyline, excellent battle system, gorgeous visuals.

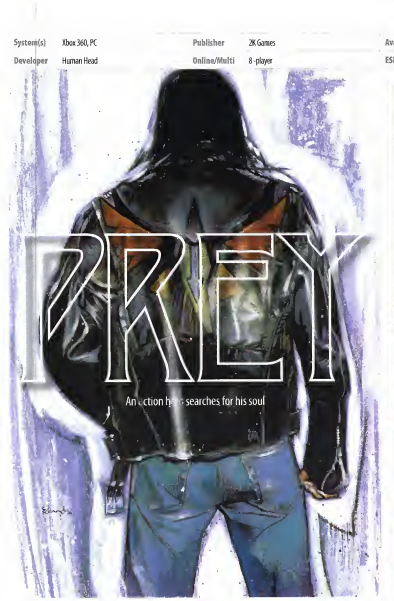
\- Wooden artillary models, limp OST, blatant linearity.



System(s)	Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	2K Games	Available	July
Developer	Human Head	Online/Multi	8-player	ESRB Rating	M

PREY

An action hero searches for his soul





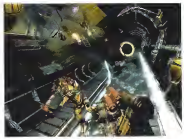


The alien designs are as rich as the setting.

words **Brady Fiechter**

Convention is, if nothing else, a clear sign of a medium's arrival. The plight of the reluctant xenophobe is certainly nothing new in the realm of gaming, and while Human Head's Prey has had the luxury of watching the notion twist and turn through multiple generations of hardware during its considerable development cycle, this game is significant in that it succeeds in simultaneously challenging the way we see action gaming and the way its heroes see themselves. Given the genre's penchant for predictability, you can't help but grin at the imagination that has fueled this frag-fest and how it all comes together in a symphony of creativity and chaos.

Not that Prey represents a revolution, but as a polished story-driven FPS title with impressive production values and a thirst for new gameplay dynamics, it's the sort of game that makes you respect those who would attempt to deliver new experiences. Unlike most run-and-gun shooters, Prey makes a living off intelligent vertical design and a relentless pace that will keep you glued to your seat. The use of gravity and teleportation



are interesting hooks, and while the level design occasionally struggles with avoiding monotonous challenges, Prey forces you to consider every angle as you blast through alien opposition in your quest to find your girlfriend, your freedom, and your sense of cultural identity.

This display is not without its issues. Just like its lead's struggle with his own heritage, Prey has difficulty fully realizing its own potential as puzzles often seem to enter into the equation for the sake of effect, especially when Tommy goes "spirit walking." While adding to the story, this lackluster mechanic fails to mature beyond switch flipping and the occasional way out of a dead end, drastically reducing its potential. Weapon balance, enemy variety, and the game's overall length also make the list of stumbling blocks on an otherwise exemplary product, but hardly steal the show.

And that's the thing: Prey doesn't always succeed, but it tries so well that you can't get mad at the game for narrowly missing its mark. When it does deliver, few games in the genre's history rival its pure sense of polish and all-out action. It has a solid story, incredible visuals, and a new approach to an age-old formula that manages to breathe some much-needed life into the genre. If you've been waiting for a game that combines the hard-hitting action of the Doom series with the knowing narrative of Half-Life, give this one a whirl. It will not disappoint.

"It has a solid story, incredible visuals, and a new approach to an age-old formula..."

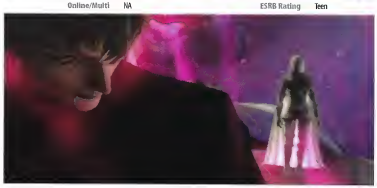
Prey

SCORE **8.5**

+ Looks great, plays fast and smooth, high atmosphere.

– Has a bit of a mechanical feel.

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Namco-Bandai Games	Available	August 29
Developer	Monolith	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen



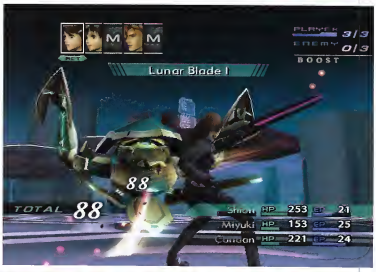
Xenosaga Episode III

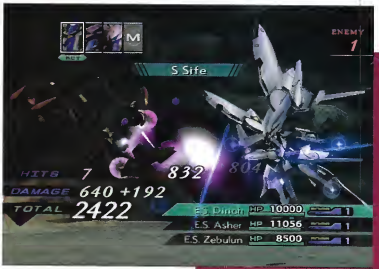
Also Sprach Zarathustra

They would have run out of meaningless Nietzsche references by Episode VI anyway.

words **Casey Loe**







Here's a quick recap of the Xenosaga series: Episode I was pretty good, but Episode II sucked, and it didn't sell half as many copies as the first. That should have spelled death for a series was supposed to run for six episodes, but somehow Monolith convinced Bandai-Namco to give them one more game in which to wrap up the series' many open storylines. Given the situation, I expected Episode III to be a low-budget, half-baked title with lots of recycled content. I could not have been more wrong: Episode III is wholly originally, phenomenally beautiful, and easily the best game in the series.

Monolith deserves an enormous amount of credit for the way they responded to criticism of Xenogears II. Not only have they avoiding making the same mistakes twice, but nearly every one of the previous installment's flaws can now be considered a strength. The excessive pre- and post-battle loading times have been reduced to almost nothing, yet the battles look as good as they ever have. And Xenosaga II's slow and complicated battle system has been a replaced by battles that are straightforward and notably quick. Monolith even axed the less popular of Xenosaga II's musicians and hired the better one to compose the entire game (her work is pleasant but rarely memorable, however, and still a far cry from Ep. I's Yasunori Mitsuda soundtrack). While far from ugly, the visuals in Episode III blow away those of past installments, and the town and dungeon environments are among the most beautiful ever to grace the PlayStation 2.

However, Episode III is not without flaws. The standard battles are fun, but do grow a bit tiresome as the game goes on, and the E.S. (mech) battles are shallow and overly simple. The few truly strategic systems—like the ability to deal damage to a "break" gauge that stuns foes when filled—are basically only a factor in boss fights. The cut scenes are also weaker than they have been in past installments. While there are several well-directed FMV scenes, many of the game's intermissions feature no action and are composed entirely of dialogue bubbles that must be advanced by the player every few seconds. These get old fast, and the choppy, jargon-filled script and amateurish voice acting certainly don't help. As in past installments, the major characters tend to be reasonably well-acted, but the actors in the smaller roles embarrass themselves by using ridiculous fake accents or over-enunciating everything. The villains are so over-the-top with their moustache-twirling bwa-ha-ha voices that many reduce their roles to cartoons.

> "...the town and dungeon environments are among the most beautiful ever to grace the PS2."

Despite the typical localization flaws, fans of the series should be pleased by how seriously Monolith has taken the task of ending the series in a satisfying way. But if you're new to the series, or are merely a casual fan with hazy memories of the first two installments, Episode III will present some challenges. The game's writers clearly felt the need to address every extant subplot and bring back every character from Episodes I&II, making for a story that feels bloated and at times incomprehensible. There is an extensive in-game database that provides background on every character, organization, or location that has ever appeared in the series, but it's an obscene amount of information to process, and you can't pull it up in the middle of cut scenes when you'll need it most. That said, new players who are willing to forgive the time spent on superfluous subplots and characters may find a satisfying story at Episode III's core.

The game's heroine, Shion, is one of the best-developed characters in recent memory—it's refreshing to see a gorgeous and brilliant woman be a little bit bitchy and self-absorbed, the way an actual human being in her position might be. And no knowledge of Xenosaga's story is necessary to appreciate the fantastic world-building and technological design that have always been one of the series' greatest strengths.

Like a theatrical production that finally hits its stride on closing night, it's a little bit heartbreaking to see Xenosaga end just as everything is coming together. But in a world where so many narrative TV shows, novels and comics are axed at the moment their ratings begin to dip, we should be grateful that Bandai-Namco and Monolith did right by their fans and gave Xenosaga the send-off it deserves.

And I will strike dow upon thee with great vengeance...

Xenosaga Episode III — score 8.5

\+ Beautiful environments and no load times.

\- Confusing for newbies, weak event scenes.

Zatch Bell: Mamodo Fury

Dressed to kill

SCORE 7.0

System	PlayStation 2	Online/Multi	N/A
Developer	Mechanic Arms	Available	September
Publisher	Namco/Bandai	ESRB Rating	Teen

Little demon puppet boy Zatch Bell has some issues, the least of which is his penchant for wearing a dress. Zatch is a target—and a fine one at that—for every other little demon puppet child (called mamodos) running around loose on planet Earth.

Zatch Bell: Mamodo Fury leaps from the anime show featuring Zatch and his human handler Kiyo. Here, the cel-shaded duo is pitted against other human/mamodo combinations in extended free-for-alls set in fairly open and destructive environments. Players can control either Zatch or or Kiyo in combat, switching between the two at will for strategic effect; Zatch can cast spells, and the human Kiyo can perform hand-to-hand attacks.

What emerges is chaotic fun, but poorly balanced chaotic fun. As Kiyo, players can knock an enemy's mamodo-controlling book to the ground, and recover it, thus winning a given fight by a (sort of) technical knock out. The problem here is that the game's human foes are almost supernaturally evasive and nimble, and getting close to them is a lot tougher than it should be. With that avenue of attack more or less rendered ineffectual, players will need to resort to a mamodo's spells to win most fights. Here, too, the game gums up the works with one button to cast up to six spells. Holding the button down allows for more powerful spells, which means enemies can get in lots of cheap hits while Zatch is bringing out the big guns. **GO**







Monster House

Great movie; great game

SCORE 8.0

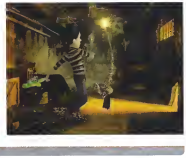
System(s)	PlayStation 2, GameCube	Online/Multi	N/A
Developer	A2M	Available	Now
Publisher	THQ	ESRB Rating	E

Resident Evil meets Goonies (and trace amounts of Evil Dead) in A2M's wonderfully crafted game adaptation of Monster House. I won't even say "as movie games go…" it's that good. Although severely underpublicized, this is a requisite paranormal elimination. The game is split up between DJ, Chowder, and Jenny who breach old man Nebbecracker's possessed house with pump-action water blasters and individual secondary weapons, to find the heart and give it some serious indigestion. The gameplay is Luigi's Mansion (still one of the best GC games around) meets Resident Evil (pre-RE4) in nature, only with more palpable puzzles and items, and sans annoying foot lockers, typewriters (bathroom breaks double as auto-save points—don't forget to flush) and cheesy loading screens, along with a nice lock-on feature and, dare I say…better ambience and gameplay. The living house harkens back to Evil Dead (the movie, not the game) and the ambience and art direction are exceptional. …And then there's "Thou Art Dead" the gem of an 8-bit Ghosts 'n Goblins throwback that A2M designed in the game. Now that's what I call a bonus. Add performances by the movie cast (gotta love Skull's wisdom) and this is pretty much E-rated paradise. **Dave Halverson**









Tetsuya Mizuguchi interview

Q Made Who?

Good vibrations

words: **Greg Orlando**

It may take a village to raise a child, and a nation of millions to hold us back, but it took one, and only one, very talented game designer to spark the creation of video games' oddest game peripheral ever: the Trance Vibrator.

Tetsuya Mizuguchi, dressed in a comfortable and stylish white button-down T-shirt with a flower pattern, laughs when he's asked about the Vibrator. To put it bluntly, the Vibrator was the brainchild of adult toy manufacturers. It was a device that worked in conjunction with the PlayStation 2 version of Rez, Mizuguchi's rhythm-based on-rails shooter.

Mizuguchi began his career at Sega, working on titles such as Sega Rally Championship, the aforementioned Rez, and Space Channel 5. After 13 years at Sega, Mizuguchi left Sega in order to form his own game company, Q Entertainment. Since leaving Sega, Mizuguchi's been busy producing games for the Nintendo DS (Meteos), the PSP (Lumines), and the Xbox 360 (Ninety-Nine Nights).

Now, Mizuguchi leans over a table somewhere in San Francisco, staring at a tape recorder that doesn't appear to be whirring. He looks at it quizzically, even after he's assured that it's working. He's come to promote Lumines II and Every Extend Extra, two puzzle games for the PSP. And he's certainly a good enough sport to talk about the time he was at a club in Japan and met a female fan who loved the game he made and the very odd peripheral it inspired ...



TRANCE VIBRATOR
The infamous Trance Vibrator, designed for use with Mizuguchi's PS2 import title Rez

Every Extend Extra

A rave in your hands.

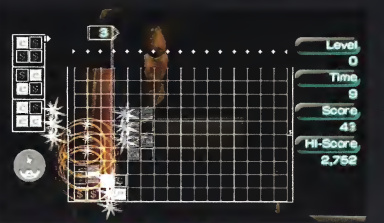


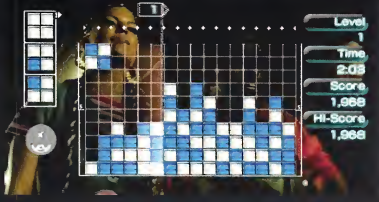


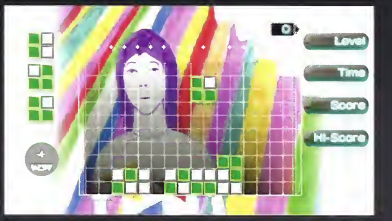












Lumines II

Bait for beat maniacs

"The stakes are getting huge. We can make anything in the future"



~Tetsuya Mizuguchi

play: Every Extend Extra hasn't been hyped very much. What's special about the game?

Tetsuya Mizuguchi: Originally, Every Extend has a very strong game design experience. It's very simple, but very addictive. This game has a very good rhythm. I think most of the game involves a core response to the rhythm. If you do something [in the game], you get a reaction from the speakers and the screen. When you play the game, you don't care about the musical element at all, but you can get the sounds and the visual. I think this translates to a very good feeling.

You seem drawn to puzzle-rhythm games.

Mizuguchi: I was very influenced by music videos in this culture. When I watched the first music videos from MTV, I was so surprised. This was a new kind of expression, a new art.

When I got into this industry in 1990, there was such poor game technology. There were 2D graphics, and beep sounds, but games already had many fans across the world. And I wondered about games' future forms. What kind of games can we make in the future using the next wave of technology.

I had some ideas in 1994 or 1995 about music in games—sort of relating to synesthesia [a rare neurological condition in which two senses are combined; people with synesthesia may perceive music and sounds as colors or shapes]. That was the basic idea for Rez, but I had to wait for the next generation of technology, the PS2 and Dreamcast era to make the game. Technology is very important for us. There's no limit. New technology will help us make a more realistic experience.

You mentioned Rez. Can you tell us about how that game inspired the creation of the Trance Vibrator?

Mizuguchi: [The Vibrator] was kind of a joke at first.

I had a very strong concept of synesthesia as it pertained to the artist [Wassily] Kandinsky. He was a painter who lived 100 years. He painted, he listened to jazz, and he could hear and smell colors.

When I had the concept of Rez at first, I went to Switzerland in 1994. I saw a big rave party over there. The people were dancing and moving not only with the music and sounds, but also with the lights and colors. I was reminded of Kandinsky—it's kind of like synesthesia. How can I make something into an interactive experience that captures that? I got a very strong image of shooting something to get a visual and sound effect, combined with vibration, so you get an impact throughout all of your senses. That was the basic Rez concept, and the vibrator just sort of happened.

Tell us about your first-ever Xbox 360 title.

Mizuguchi: Ninety-Nine Nights is an attempt to integrate a game and movie elements. What is the weak point of a movie? It's one-line entertainment; you watch it for two hours. You can't touch the screen. A game, however, is interactive. We wanted to give players the opportunity to not only see one side of the story, but play through both sides of the story. Everybody has a reason, some conflict. I watch the news. Every country has its own point-of-view and series of excuses. But if you watch everything, you may understand what's happening in the world. That kind of concept we're bringing into the game. You can play as both sides [in the war]. You can feel something that after you've played through with all the characters. That's what we're trying to do, to create a new form of interactive entertainment.

What's the nicest thing anyone's ever said about your games?

Mizuguchi: Oh…*[Laughs]* When I went to a club in Tokyo, a lady came up to me and she watched my eyes. She said, 'You are the guy who made Rez,' and I told her I was. She thanked me for the game and she had a trance vibrator. I never asked her to go into more detail about it, but I thought that it was really nice that she'd mention it.

How do you see the video game industry growing and maturing?

Mizuguchi: The stakes are getting huge. We can make anything in the future. The game industry is getting to be like a sponge, sucking up everything. It's a very special media form. Most other forms of media— TV, music, movies—are limited. With games there's no limit. I don't know the future, but there's a lot of freedom there.

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Konami	Available	September
Developer	Hudson Soft	Online/Multi	Yes	ESRB Rating	T

Rengoku II

The Stairway to H.E.A.V.E.N.

words **Heather Campbell**

Robot wars

There's a kind of villain in anime who rambles on and on about how, "War is man's destiny." You know the guy; he's usually got an arm made of technology, a head full of blazing white hair, and he sits on a throne in some deserted palace, overcome with ennui. He says stuff like, "Fighting is our fate," or "Why do humans feel the need to kill each other?" He'll cap it off with a pretentious reference to Sartre or Milton, and then demand that the hero dies.

He's like the bad guy in *Cassiherm*, or the monologist at the end of *Escaflowne* -- you know villain I'm talking about, right?

I think that guy wrote *Rengoku II: The Stairway to H.E.A.V.E.N.*

The sequel to the dungeon-crawling, RPG-fight-fest *Rengoku: The Tower of Purgatory* (a PSP launch game with an equally pompous title), *Rengoku II* picks up the story about the A.D.A.M. series autonomous combat robots who are still locked in battle, fighting each other to the death after mankind did away with war.

Our robot hero fights his way through an eight-level tower of warfare machines. Upon defeating his enemies and collecting their weapons, he can upgrade his attributes until he is nearly unbeatable.

Along the way, this A.D.A.M. robot will undergo a fair amount of self-examination, stopping to ponder about the meaning of envy, or the peculiarities of nostalgia, when he assaults the level boss. Remember, though the game has character designs by Jun Suemi, and music by Kwong Wing Chan, it was written by that anime villain.

There is no death in *Rengoku II*, there is only setback. If the protagonist is defeated, he falls through the floor and is forced to assault the level again. This reinforces the helpless feeling that pervades the game, and the story. Death is no release. There's no real way to lose the game, and no way to stop fighting.

Rengoku II has slick level art and fancy robot models. The music and interface say expensive production design. But the game itself is an uneven mix of novelty and tedium. Like *Rengoku*, *Rengoku II*'s main appeal is the customizable robot champion; picking up pieces of other robots and adding them to your body is the only way to advance through the game. There's something quite glorious about creating a robot with two sword arms and a gun for a head.

In fact, the perverse joy of seeing a man made out of magnums is your only incentive to continue the heavily repetitive combat. Rooms are simply complicated boxes, with pillars placed in odd positions to encourage strafing. Crates are stacked up to the ceiling, deposited by some unknown benefactor, full of energy or ammo.

Still, it seems like Hudson soft was awfully proud of their layout; they sure make you take notice as you backtrack four or five times per level to equip new items to your A.D.A.M.

There is of course, the multiplayer online mode, where you pit your A.D.A.M. against up to four friends. Rare is the player, however, who knows four other people with PSPs.

The whole game seems like an exercise in monotony; a battle-tech demo with refreshing character design. Then again, man isn't forced to fight – his destiny is war. If that's the case, shouldn't we be enjoying ourselves a little bit more?

Rengoku II: The Stairway to H.E.A.V.E.N. **score 7.5**

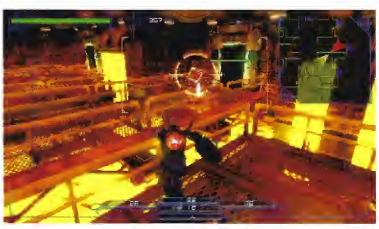
\+ I can't say it enough. The character design is really cool.

\- Who wants to play in a future so dreary and repetitive? And where are those crates coming from?



"There is no death in Rengoku II, there is only setback."

Thou shalt plunge cowl, and kill 'em all.





System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Namco-Bandai	Available	Now
Developer	Namco-Bandai	Online/Multi	Custom Wi-Fi	ESRB Rating	T

Tekken: Dark Resurrection

Namco resurrects Tekken on PSP with astonishing results

words **Nick Des Barres**

Tekken: Dark Resurrection is probably the highest-budget handheld game of all time. It is polished, utterly seamless, and fairly aromatic with the heady scent of what the Japanese call *kanseido*: Literally "completion", a term referring to the overall maturity of a product. In so many words, it feels like the PSP's killer app.

Financially, however, I know it will not be. In a perfect world, perhaps...but Tekken is too long-standing a series, with a sharp dividing line between those who dig its nutty brushed-steel aesthetic, and those who simply don't. Something of a shame, perhaps, as Dark Resurrection is quite possibly the most impressive Tekken product ever released.

Where to begin? Compared with the average PSP game, Dark Resurrection is like a hallucinatory dream. It's like it came from another planet, where the PSPs are made out of gold and platinum. I don't want to sound ridiculous, but the sheer impact T:DR has upon first play is profound: Nobody can deny this is the best-looking PSP game yet, a true indicator of what the hardware is capable of given appropriate time and resources.

Yeah, before anyone cries foul, it's a port. On a platform plagued by them. But T:DR is a port *down* (from Namco's System 256 arcade board, essentially a beefed-up PS2), and the magic of ports pointing southward from more robust hardware means developers forced to shoot for something higher than they might have with an original product. Gaming history is replete with such examples: Street Fighter II on SNES, Virtua Fighter 2 on Saturn, Resident Evil 4 on PlayStation 2. All would have been inconceivable without the prior watermark set by the original.

With that said, nothing I've seen on PSP to date gave me any clue that such a faithful port of Tekken: Dark Resurrection would be possible. If you're familiar with Tekken 5 on PS2, that's what you're getting on PSP (with, of course, the added bells and whistles in the form of new characters Lili and Dragunov, revival character Armor King, retextured stages, tons of new character customizations, and rejiggered balance). Are texture resolutions reduced? Are models simplified? Sure they are. But on the PSP's small screen, in the heat of 60fps battle, it's not something you'll ever notice -- every last bit of the arcade stage architecture is here, and the characters' flowing rococo costumes are just as flamboyant as in the arcades. To use a series analogy, the dumbing-down is *far* less apparent than, say, Tekken 3 on PSone. I hope I've made myself clear: T:DS is unnaturally beautiful. To be playing a handheld game that looks this good almost seems like science fiction.





> "In so many words, it feels like the PSP's killer app."

What about the game itself? Well...what can you say, really? It's Tekken, and Tekken means formulaically excellent. Returned to pre-4 roots at the behest of fans around the globe, wonky multi-level stages banished, you're essentially going to be playing the same game you were almost ten years ago. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it", goeth the old adage, and T:DR's gameplay is most certainly not broken. I do, however, take minor issue with the way it's been presented on PSP. I'll tell it to you straight: You're gonna need buddies. Namco has done their best to make the game a fulfilling one-player experience...but how thrilling can a versus fighting game really *be* alone? It's like trying to play chess with yourself. Sure, there are myriad ways to fight the CPU, all delivering the reward of money with which you can buy costume add-ons or unlock the luscious pre-rendered ending sequences for each character, but it gets old fast. Thankfully there is the Dojo mode, in which you fight "ghosts" of other, real players -- both preset, and downloadable with a net connection. This is perhaps T:DR's most interesting feature: The ability to fight against computer-analyzed simulacrums of real Tekkenistas, rather than pre-determined, fallible, branch-based CPU algorithms.

And yet for all of Namco's innovation, T:DR remains a somewhat empty one-player experience, lacking any true goal. For one thing, every character is immediately available from the start -- even Devil Jin, who Tekken 5 players will remember being, excuse*z* mon français, a bitch to unlock. While this is, of course, a true representation of Dark Resurrection in the arcade, from a Tekken home version series standpoint it's a bit anticlimactic. The anemic minigame offering -- Tekken Bowl, resurrected from Tekken Tag Tournament -- is a far cry from the Tekken Force and Devil Within modes of recent home versions and does little to help.

If you've got another friend with a PSP handy, however (even if they *don't* own a copy of the game -- T:DR supports gamesharing for versus mode, albeit with very lengthy load times and no selection of stage background), it's time to *rock out*, baby. This is where T:DR comes into its own as a fully-fledged entertainment product: If you have another human being to duel with, Dark Resurrection facilitates the mad, precision beatdowns, with virtually no wi-fi hiccups. Admittedly, true online play would have been a huge asset, but realistically speaking, this is a game that lives and dies in increments of 1/60th of a second. Any internet play would be necessarily be crippled. For one-on-one, human interaction, however, it's unbeatable. I can say with complete confidence that Tekken: Dark Resurrection is the best handheld fighting game ever made. The lengthy loading times so commonly associated with the PSP aren't an issue, either; loading in and out of battle is a matter of seconds, hardly perceptible.

It's quite simple: If you love Tekken... heck, even if like Tekken, this is a portable experience you need to have. You'll find yourself in awe of your PSP again. It feels like the system is finally coming into its own, inching ever closer to blossoming into Ken Kutaragi's much-touted "most beautiful thing in the world". Whereas the DS with its comparatively low development costs is allowing for a massive "un-game" boom, the PSP is playing it safe, sticking to traditional, established game types, and Tekken: Dark Resurrection is immediately at the lead of the pack. If you're looking for a game that truly lives up to the PSP's promise, this is it.

...60 fps on a portable machine.

Tekken: Dark Resurrection SCORE **9.0**

+	Impossibly beautiful visuals, diamond-sharp Tekken gameplay
–	True online play would have been a big plus

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Majesco	Available	September
Developer	Arc System Works	Online/Multi	Yes	ESRB Rating	Teen

Guilty Gear Judgement

Break out the devil horns, GG is back…

words **Dave Halverson**

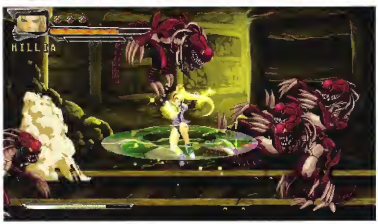
Apparently, Heaven and Hell can't get enough of each other as yet another iteration of Guilty Gear is on its way to hand-made game connoisseurs everywhere. Had your fill you say? I couldn't agree more, which is why I'm so happy that Arc System Works finally took the game—well, a major chunk of it anyway—into previously unexplored territory…and not some ass-wipe puzzle gumball drop. Guilty Gear Judgment is a Golden Axe-style arcade action game bathed in hand-painted backgrounds, hell monsters, and, as the stories progress (each character you meet becomes playable, up to 21) rideable beasts and hellacious bosses. Judgment even has a jump button. Admittedly, I've just described what most would consider a relic of gaming past but we'd have crapped ourselves if this came out in the early '90s. The combination of fighting game accoutrements such as combos, psych bursts, and overdrive attacks coupled with traditional arcade action gameplay is surprisingly appealing on a portable system, especially when you can play wireless co-op and watch the screen fill up like an old Neo Geo game on 'roids. And for you fighting fans out there, GG X2 Reload isn't exactly worm bait. 23 characters (including Robo-Ky, Justice, and Dilf!) and six modes will keep you busy until hell freezes.

It's strange—very strange—that Majesco has had such a bad run. How does one release BloodRayne, Phantom Dust, Guilty Gear, Aeon Flux, and Psychonauts, and fail? Was Advent Rising that costly? Here's a small publisher that has made mostly good moves (sans shoving a lamppost up their best franchise's arse by handing it over to Uwe "the brand killer" Boll, and passing on one of the best producers in the industry to fix BloodRayne 2 and Advent) yet, they've sank into the depths of obscurity. With any luck GGJ will see decent enough distribution to leave a mark on the PSP even if it is just a tiny 666.



"Guilty Gear Judgment is a Golden Axe-style arcade action game..."







Look at that yummy 2-D. You know you want it.

Guilty Gear Judgment — SCORE **7.5**

+	Heaven could use a good kick in the ass, and this is a suitable courier
–	Judgment would be even cooler with throws. Now "Let's Rock!"

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Capcom	Available	September
Developer	Capcom	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E 10+

Mega Man ZX

M.E.G.A. Drive engaged!

words **Dave Halverson**

Mega Man DX possesses all of the rudimentary traits that the most popular franchise in 2D history has become known for: Pattern-based mechanoids that replicate off-screen inhabit each level; jumping, boosting, wall-kicking, and shooting make up the bulk of the gameplay, sealed corridors lead to maniacal boss encounters, and of course, no ducking allowed. What it doesn't possess is Mega Man, and I have to admit, I don't miss him. We find instead two new characters—Vent, and for the first time in franchise history, a female lead, Aile. While they share a storyline, Aile is the smaller and more agile warrior to Vent's brawn. They also possess their own specific cut-scenes—high-quality anime right on your DS.







" ...ZX is easily the best looking game in the series "

Using Aile as the default review character, after losing her mother to a Maverick insurgence she was found alone and dejected by Giro, of Giro Express (a sort of Fed Ex of the future) for whom she eventually becomes a transporter. On this day she's assigned to deliver a top-secret package to the Guardian Defense Force, a.k.a. Maverick hunters, when suddenly she and Giro fall under Maverick attack. Knocked down a ravine, Aile's life takes a second dramatic turn, as the contents of the package, ajar from the fall, decide to lend her a hand, transmutation style. Mets-Encapsulated Granule Awareness SYSTEM online! Megamerged with Biometal Model X, Aile can change form at will as she makes her way into the thick of the struggle. Human form is used to speak with townspeople and for basic walking and jumping, Model X for long range buster shots, dashing and wall kicks, and ZX for MX plus short range attacks such as the ZX Saber. Additional forms follow as bosses fall, some of which regenerate for you to pillage maximum items. Side missions are a big part of the game too. Main ops progress the story but side missions are beneficial in gaining items and key information.

While it's definitely cut from the Mega Man mold, ZX is easily the best looking game in the series with its magnificent bosses, gorgeous animation and character design, and generous layers of parallax. The DS bottom screen is put to good use too, between the helpful cyber elves, managing your metal, and gathering enemy intelligence. Vice Commander Fleueve (Willy's out—freaky Fleueve is in) lends a hand too using collected E Crystals to repair boss-weary Biometal. Next stop for ZX, next-generation…don't I wish.

Mega Man ZX

score 9.0

\+ Beautiful hi-res, stunning hand drawn 2D

– Doesn't give play have changed much. Oh the irie.

Loco Roco

Score 9.0

System	PSP	**Online/Multi**	NA
Developer	SCEJ	**Available**	Sept. 5
Publisher	SCEA	**ESRB Rating**	E

LocoRoco makes me happy. In fact, it almost makes me OD on happy. If they gave this game to depressed people Xanax would be over the counter. Normally, bouncing, assimilating, tilting and defending tiny amoebas on blubbery backgrounds would rank somewhere in my "I'll play that when I'm dead" file, but Kaouno-san has managed to make the mundane entertain through a mesmerizing jumble of shapes, color and especially sound. As captivating as LocoRoco is, it's the audio that really captures my imagination. Every time the LocoRocos pile on each other and sing I have to turn on American Chopper just to regain my manhood. Luckily there are mean Mojos to even things out. The controls couldn't be simpler—anyone can play—yet the level design offers paths for both the casual and skilled gamer alike. Finding all 20 LocoRocos and 3 Mui Mui pals on each level poses a formidable gelatinous challenge. And it's all for a good cause: to populate your Loco house, adding more LocoRocos, platforms, gears, and other gizmos, and of course increase LocoRoco numbers and regain world peace.

Sony finally has its Nintendogs, and Kirby, I think, a possible mate. **Dave Halverson**



If it was a painting in a gallery, I'd buy it.







preview

MechAssault: Phantom War

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Publisher**	Majesco
Developer	Backbone	**Available**	August

Mighty mechanical behemoths, last seen on Xbox in MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf, go tiny in MechAssault: Phantom War for the Nintendo DS. In this futuristic war, players can commandeer anything that moves, piloting about 20 different tanks, turrets, battle armors, and mechs.

War is never pretty, and in 3141 the mechs rule. A growing conflict has players piloting vehicles in the third-person perspective, blasting a host of over- and undersized targets, scaling huge walls with the aid of a mech's jumpjets, and hijacking enemy vehicles because, hey, it's fun to do.

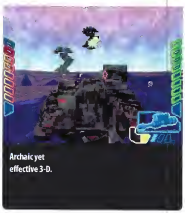




The neurohack system stands out as Phantom War's most intriguing feature. Here, it's possible to approach an enemy vehicle and use a grappling claw to attach to it. This brings up a minigame utilizing the Nintendo DS' touch screen; a series of symbols on the gameplay screen must be matched on the touch pad. If the symbols are matched correctly in a given time, the hack is successful and players can now control the enemy vehicle as their own.

Twenty-four single-player missions spanning four alien worlds are available, and four players can use the DS' wireless feature to slug it out in multiplayer competitions. **Greg Orlando**





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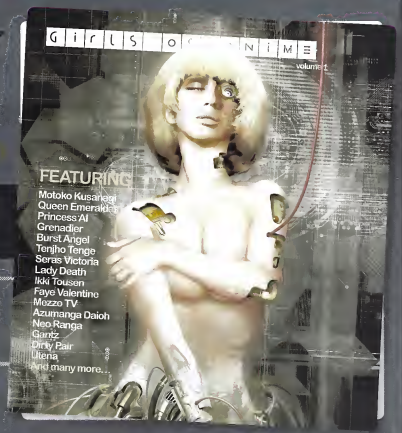
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Everybody wants to rule the world

Developer NHN Corporation
Online/Multi Persistent online
Publisher Codemasters
Available October

"…the only persistent state world game that allows you to become the supreme ruler of an entire server…"



The mega-armor of the ArchLord.

words **Mike Griffin**

As ArchLord approaches its projected October release, we decided it was time to take another look at the only persistent state world game that allows you to become the supreme ruler of an entire server, voted into power fairly and democratically by fellow players. Developed by Korean online giant NHN, ArchLord's western operations will be managed by Codemasters. If you're somewhat familiar with the game already, we've also secured exclusive first info and images (see next page) detailing the stuff everyone *really* wants to know about: the powers and domain of the ArchLord. For everybody else: a summary of this multifaceted MMO is requisite.

ArchLord exists in the fantasy world of Chantra, scored magnificently by the London Symphony Orchestra and drawn by a Renderware engine modified to handle huge fantasy landscapes and tons of roaming critters ripe for termination. As Human, Orc or Moon Elf and one of eight classes, you can traverse the world—preferably astride each race's customizable mounts—and follow thousands of quest paths through 100 levels of new abilities, spells and other reliable RPG character development traditions. Gulp down potions to replenish stats or to temporarily mutate into a monster, gaining its abilities and the confidence of its kin. Though each class is designed with solo viability in mind, you'll want to form hunting parties with other players to challenge Chantra's deepest catacombs.

Better still, sign-up with a guild to experience ArchLord's top-end gameplay and seize control of castles by defeating the toughest NPC foes. In addition to owning a nice base of operations, Guilds that possess castles will control the tax rate on every shop and auction house in the area. And if diplomacy can't resolve disputes between guilds over the economy, castle siege engines will carry the discontent forward in a ball of fire. One player will sit atop Chantra's well-earned hierarchy for twenty one days each month…one player with the power to calm any crisis.





Race and Class in the world of Chantra

The Humans

Many years removed from their slavery to the Orcs, the renewed Humans forge ahead, building grand and protective cities.

Available Classes



Knight
A tough melee combatant with excellent party support skills.



Archer
This ranged attacker uses highly-specialized imbued arrows.



Mage
Fragile, poorly armored, and stocked with direct damage spells.

The Orcs

This physically imposing and barbaric elder race has begrudgingly accepted the other civilized races as trade partners.

Available Classes



Berserker
A vicious fighter that fuses physical attacks with sharp magical flare.



Hunter
With night vision and unflinching endurance, there's no better scout.



Sorcerer
The ritualists of Chantra, calling forth dark curses from the abyss.

The Moon Elves

The ancient and reclusive Moon Elves have reluctantly entered the world of Humans and Orcs—dispatching just two representatives.

Available Classes



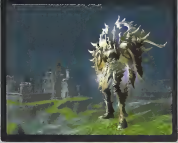
Ranger
Solid damage and speed compliment the most balanced ranged class.



Elementalist
The minion specialist, able to summon powerful elemental servitors.

The ArchLord

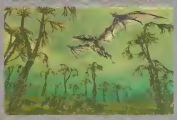
Having claimed the Archon artifact and donned the ArchLord armor, his or her power is absolute…but not impervious to public opinion. The AL website will offer player profiles and include a "mood indicator" so players on the ArchLord's server can vote on whether he's doing a good job or not. Will players elect a dictator who rules from his castle with an iron fist, or a gentle monarch that speaks among her people? Will the ArchLord behave like an honorable emperor or rain heavy taxes and harsh weather down upon complaining plebs? More importantly, what kind of toys will the ArchLord have to play with during 21 days of supreme rule?



A personal dragon to own the skies







The terrific art will be matched with fire-breathing dragon mounts at his disposal. He to fly as high and far as the game allows. With vast open-world environments and special suspense inside giant floating airships, the engine allows for impressive flight range. It's role well-suited to an all-powerful leader and offers a great view of the peons below.

Conquering the castle boss





Once a guild has captured a castle they will need to take on the castle boss, a huge fiery Balrog-esque beast. This will be like a traditional raid level boss encounter with players needing to work together to bring it down. The recommended number of combatants for this epic encounter will be around fifty per guild.

Royal summons on call 24/7

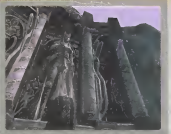


A trio of powerful Royal Knights can be called forth at any time. They posses an enhanced version of the Human Knight's skill set and will act as bodyguards, staying by the ArchLord's side. Big AL can also summon a random batch of twenty creatures picked from spots around the world and teleported to the castle. Once summoned, these monster herds will recognize only the ArchLord and launch into a full-scale assault on all others present.



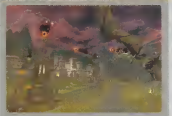


A Great Hall for a grim tyrant



The lavish Great Hall inside the ArchLord castle is lined with statues of previous ArchLords and marker stones charting the timeline of each ruler. You'll see player names listed here alongside the dates of their reign.

Claiming your dominion



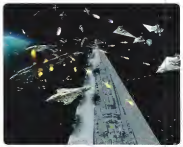
Castle sieges will require players to capture marker stones as they battle into the fortress, activating portals and resurrection towers to bring more troops to the field. Occupation means players won't have to destroy the place they are about to call home. There will be some obvious fiery damage to the castle, but this will be limited so as to encourage forward progress.

Star Wars Empire at War
Forces of Corruption

Step aside Jabba, crime has a new face

Developer: Petroglyph
Online/Multi: 8p conquest
Publisher: LucasArts
Available: October





Ground battles in FoCare greatly enhanced by troop transport and more intense tactical showdowns.



words **Mike Griffin**

There's a new criminal genius rising to prominence in the Underworld of the Star Wars mythos and his name is Tyber Zann. The protagonist of Forces of Corruption, the upcoming expansion to Star Wars Empire at War, is immediately likable and perfectly despicable—in effect, the prototypical SW villain. Using Tyber's powers of corruption, you'll bribe and poison all factions that stand in the way of the ultimate prize: the new Super Star Destroyer "Eclipse". It packs a laser with the punch of a Death Star. Nobody will stand in TZ's way if he can commandeer that bird, and he will guarantee much profit and debauchery to all who join his ranks. Before sipping from that glass, however, a galactic map built for real-time strategy must be conquered.

Taking place during The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi timelines, Forces of Corruption details the galaxy's wartime vulnerability to Underworld influence. Your first experience with Tyber Zann will be his escape from the prison mines of Kessel, where a little bribery and corruption goes a long way. Han Solo and Chewbacca are parked outside in the Millennium Falcon, happy to accept a few extra credits for a quick get away. From there you'll stake out a small base of operations using FoC's clean and streamlined interface. Launching Saboteur units to slowly corrupt, bribe and extort other planets will bring in a stream of income (and recruits) which Tyber will use to expand his space fleet and ground forces. With access to the black market and stolen Rebel and Imperial technology like cloaking devices, B-Wings, Plasma Tanks and lovely Destroyer Droids, it won't be long before you can go toe-to-toe with powerful enemy armadas in epic space and land battles.

With Forces of Corruption, LucasArts also responds to a wishlist of player requests, including garrison functionality for infantry units, orbital space-to-land blasts from capital ships, a deeper storyline and more ultra-powerful Force-using heroes to command or slay. In fact, we killed Luke Skywalker within the first few hours of gameplay. Somebody had to teach the kid a lesson.

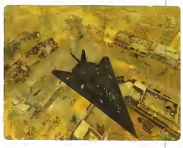
"…access to the black market and stolen Rebel and Imperial technology like cloaking devices…"

Joint Task Force

Into the heart of terrorist country

Developer: Most Wanted Entertainment
Online/Multi: Campaign co-op, 1-8p DM/Domination/CTF
Publisher: Vivendi Games
Available: September





Call in precision strikes based on satellite recon and leave Ageia-enhanced destruction in your wake.



words **Mike Griffin**

Vivendi's Joint Task Force is shaping up to be a modern war fanatic's ideal RTS, with dozens of real world locations and missions ripped from the headlines. Tempering its intense military exchanges and fantastic Ageia-powered explosions (no pre-scripted demolition reels here), JTF also has a contemporary conscience designed to keep your trigger finger in check.

The main American and Russian hero characters will stay with you during the entire game, leveling up skills and load-outs as they progress. You'll encounter tank, sniper and pilot heroes, each excelling according to their specialty. Hero units can confiscate and drive vehicles originating from several officially licensed military suppliers, including Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics and Sikorsky. Shading and details abound, all the way down to steam escaping tiny air vents on vehicles. Though off-map units like F1-17 bombers and A10 Warthogs can't be controlled, you can toggle direct control for most land vehicles, helicopters and even Harrier jets. Heroes can also request troop reinforcements via Black Hawk chopper, or call in larger units aboard giant Hercules transport planes.

Much like the CNN we know today, journalists are embedded with each commander's unit; not only is your hero under fire from terrorists and militias, he also has the world's media to contend with. A small picture-in-picture screen plays the latest in-game news as each mission evolves. If you respect the rules of engagement and mitigate civilian casualties, the public (and your backers) will be mollified. Thankfully, most of the danger zones you drop into—including Bosnia, Somalia, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf—are heavily populated with bad guys to make an example out of on live TV.

With a full campaign co-op mode and 8-player competitive online modes, Most Wanted has carefully sculpted Joint Task Force to meet genre expectations. We shall wait to see how this craft pays off in the final campaign.

"…most of the danger zones you drop into…are heavily populated with bad guys to make an example out of on live TV."

Developer	Techland	Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	Team shoot-outs, bank heists, train robbery	Available	Q1 2007

Call of Juarez

A golden opportunity for revenge

Preview

words Mike Griffin



The most recent preview version of this Techland-developed wild west FPS is quite convincing, demonstrating loads of late-development polish and prompting us to add Call of Juarez to a shortlist of shooters to watch. As we go to press, Techland and Ubisoft have announced the game's postponement to early 2007 to coincide with a next-gen console version.

The tale of the lost gold of Juarez, said to be Montezuma's ransom, has been passed down through each generation, its myth and prize growing exponentially with each re-telling. Billy is one of the game's playable characters, and like many others, he has heard the supernatural beckoning of the Call. Billy's father is presumed dead and his step-dad is a nasty man, so he's more than happy to leave home in search of treasure—trusty whip in tow. The second playable character is the mad Reverend Ray, gifted with wickedly smooth voice over by actor Marc Alaimo (*Star Trek DS9*). The Reverend is a legendary ex-gunfighter and also brother to Billy's step-dad, who is murdered early in the game. Ray is convinced that Billy is the killer and he storms out of his chapel in pursuit.

"...strong gameplay variations: stuff like shoot-outs, duels, bar room brawls and horseback pursuits."

Playing as the hunter or hunted provides a mix of first person action: Ray's gameplay is all about six-shooters, rifles, semi-autos and slow-mo power, with interesting independent firing controls for each hand. Slow-mo adds a second on-screen reticle, allowing the Reverend to fall upon his befuddled foes like a raptor on a flock of chickens. He delights in torching the unworthy in cleansing fires and can ensnare enemies with the ominous scripture he mutters. Young Billy is wily and agile and his campaign involves more stealth and finesse. He can crack his whip at foes and use it to swing across gaps or climb up cliffs. He's also been trained in tomahawk and bow use by friendly native folk.





Some of the wide-open outdoor environments are so attractive, you may want to holster your six-shooters and talk in the view.



Inspired by classic American old west history, Call of Juarez boasts many strong gameplay variations to keep you occupied: stuff like shoot-outs, duels, bar room brawls and horseback pursuits, all interspersed with physics puzzles and boss fights. The enemy AI moves well and actively uses cover and physics objects. The game's multiplayer mode (untested thus far) looks very interesting. Drawing on further classic wild-west scenarios, teams will participate in bank heists, spring comrades from jail and experience the great Wilcox Train Robbery firsthand—as defender or daring thief.



Techland's Chrome series of graphics engines have consistently engendered praise, and this updated code for Juarez—especially true if your PC has a new video card—is laced with modern details. Witness detailed bump and normal-mapped characters, lush outdoor complexity of near-Oblivion caliber, and our now-ubiquitous friends, HDR and bloom, on hand to simulate light intensity with some impressive and subtle adjustments, indoors and out, day and night, across huge western sets along the US-Mexican border, circa 1882. Co.'s sound design is very good too, conspiring with the aforementioned visuals to lay down compellingly bleak, dusty and hostile atmospheres.

We're looking for a couple of improvements before release, notably in the realm of hardware optimization (it's a very demanding engine), but Call of Juarez is progressing well. This could be the hot ticket for those seeking a good western yarn stitched together by quality production values, violence and vengeance.



Developer	Introversion Software	Publisher	n/a
Online/Multi	6p versus, office mode	Available	October





"...eliminate the enemy's civilian population and try to save your own, while stifling retaliation attempts."

Defcon

The countdown to extinction — Preview

Imagine yourself as a general in a command center deep below ground, connected to virtually every major military resource your country possesses. Now imagine other generals in subterranean command centers just like yours, stationed in other countries. And you all have access to enough military might—at the touch of a button—to eventually end the world. So perhaps it's best to make some friends. UK-based indie developer Introversion's latest title is Defcon, a competitive, tactical multiplaye game inspired both visually and thematically by the 1983 cult classic film WarGames. Experiencing the tension and paranoia of the Cold War era, players will position and postulate their way to all-out global thermonuclear armageddon.

The goal in Defcon is pretty straightforward: eliminate the enemy's civilian population and try to save your own, while stifling retaliation attempts. Played across a world map with clean, subtly-stylized and deliberately minimal graphics, Defcon, like Introversion's previous games (Uplink, Darwinia), will probably age better than most of the stuff released today. The mass extermination numbers reported on screen provide ample material for the mind's eye to assemble terrible pictures without the need for normal-mapped mushroom clouds or PhysX-enhanced fallout. Defcon's board resembles the big strategic map screen in WarGames: little vector-lined icons and pictograms describing battleships, aircraft, submarines, radars and silos. Missile trajectory paths leave tracers as they arch downward to fulfill their despicable destiny. Every nuke exposes the map position of the silo, bomber, or sub, suddenly making them prime targets for counter-attack. If there's anything this kind of warfare could be characterized of being, it's impersonal. Defcon's minimal atmosphere captures this unnerving vibe, as cavernous ambient music plays and the deep rumble of nuclear detonations reverberates overhead—each general tucked away in his bunker, detached from the ongoing annihilation. Of course that doesn't mean you can't give the other happy nukers a call and ask how the family is.



Defcon has built-in chat, both public and private, and this functionality is all about talking strategy, building alliances, casting aspersions and ultimately causing more civilian mega-death. A typical multiplayer game runs 30 to 40 minutes, during which time a number of alliances may form and shatter. Treacherous dogs may turn on you when you're most vulnerable, or you may decide to do the same, playing cat and mouse with hidden subs, carriers and spy planes. The game's Defcon system fuels this tension. As the five Defcon levels slip away during a session, players begin with the initial alert and radar deployments, followed by naval and airborne combat, and on to more aggressive actions before finally hitting Defcon 1: nukes are ready for launch. After this devastating phase, the final few surviving units will attempt to nail the enemy capital and secure final victory.

A thinking man's competitive game with a dark premise and rich tactics, Defcon will be unlike any other release this year and should arrive at a fetching price. Kilotons of bang for the buck.



Millions eradicated in the blink of an eye.





The Top Brass (Left to right) Introversion Generals Tom Arundel, John Kwiettenbeit, Chris Delay, and Mark Morris pose for posterity between strategy sessions.



ask alienware

no. 005 // september 2006

In this month's Ask Alienware we explore new inquiries about Windows Vista and DirectX 10, poke some holes in hardware firewalls and discuss high-definition disc drives for the PC.

Blu-ray Disc™

Q. Does Alienware intend to offer system packages that include a Blu-ray or HD-DVD drive, and as a company, are you choosing to back one format more predominantly than the other? Also: what kind of CPU and graphics do you recommend for a PC system with a high-def optical drive? Chris, Edmonton AB.



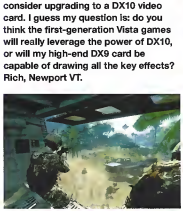
Alienware: Alienware will always offer its customers cutting edge technology at the time they become available, and it does plan to offer its customers Blu-ray drives. At this moment the industry seems to favor Blu-ray drives over its HD-DVD cousin, and in the next coming months as both formats rally for market share, you should see price competitions between the two. Alienware favors the Core 2 Extreme CPU and the HDCP compliant NVIDIA 7950 GX2 graphics card as great choices to pair with a high-definition optical drive.

Q. My friend swears by his Linksys router for security. He says it's a "hardware firewall" and therefore he doesn't need to use any software firewall solutions at all. Is this safe practice? I'd be happy to turn off Windows Firewall and Zone Alarm, as I hear they can slow down gameplay in online games. Carl, Detroit MI.



Alienware: Protecting your system from critical errors due to malicious viruses is a hot topic issue. The key thing to remember is: more protection is better than less. There are routers that provide firewall functionality; however, anytime you remove functionality (hardware or software) you are taking a risk. The good news is that you can optimize both hardware and software firewalls to match how you use your bandwidth. For example: if you trust the servers you are playing on, you can set up your firewall (through exceptions) to allow the full transfer of data from that server, maintaining a smooth connection.

Q. I'm looking for some information about DirectX 10. I plan to purchase Vista as soon as it's available and I'd like to know how soon I should consider upgrading to a DX10 video card. I guess my question is: do you think the first-generation Vista games will really leverage the power of DX10, or will my high-end DX9 card be capable of drawing all the key effects? Rich, Newport VT.



Alienware: Current generation graphics cards do not offer Direct X 10, so it will take some time for the install base of DX 10 graphics cards to grow among consumers. Since game developers understand this, next-generation games will be compatible with both DX 9 and DX 10. However, all of the graphics detail for DX 10 optimized games will not be apparent on a DX 9 graphics card. If you are looking for the best gaming experience possible, an upgraded graphics cards is the way to go (just make sure it is DX 10 compatible). A quick search for DX 10 enabled games shows that Crysis (developed by Crytek) will be one of the first DX 10 games.

Nugget of information: DX10 utilizes an updated version of Direct3D that alleviates the workload from the processor and moves it to the graphics card.

Windows Vista™

Q. I hear that Windows Vista will require a certain minimum video card spec to run correctly. Why would an operating system need 3D acceleration and shaders to function, and what kind of OS features actually use the higher graphical requirements? Andrew, Parker CO.



Alienware: Designed to be highly intuitive, the new premium Windows Vista interface is more lifelike and visually appealing than its predecessors. The Aero interface includes features like:

- Translucent windows
- A 3D perspective
- Rich texture
- Advanced color mixes
- Cool animations

Systems without the required graphics driver or enough system memory will not be able to run the new premium visual experience. However, they can still run Windows Vista if they meet the minimum system requirements. These systems will deliver a Basic Windows Vista experience that is similar to the look and feel of Windows XP.

Alienware recommends getting a system that supports the Vista premium experience in order to take full advantage of all the features of Windows Vista.



"...all of the graphics detail for DX 10 optimized games will not be apparent on a DX 9 graphics card."

If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bitrates and firewalls, send them along to **askalienware@playmagazine.com**. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free 1-year subscription, so don't be shy!



< Nick Des Barres

Dai Kohama >



Tokyo Toy Show 2006 Report

words **Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama**

Ah, the fabled Tokyo Toy Show. What was pre-Tokyo Game Show an annual orgy of video gaming delights (much as the Consumer Electronics Show was before the advent of E3) has now been pared back into a form more closely resembling that with which it debuted way back in 1962. We're talking toys, toys, and more toys – the cream of the crop from the country that arguably makes the best on Earth.

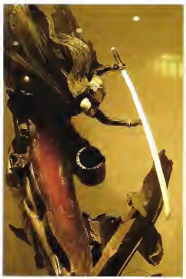
Three major trends were identifiable this year. Robots, which are getting ever-cheaper yet ever more complex, "iyashi-kei", or "healing" toys designed mainly for adults to help soothe the myriad stresses of modern life in Japan, and finally "brain-training"-style toys patterned after Nintendo's ultramegahit Brain Exercise DS Training For Adults Produced By Professor Ryuta Kawashima Of Tohoku University New Industry Creation Hatchery Center "games" on DS.

Without further ado, allow us to bring you the sights of Tokyo Toy Show 2006, straight from venue Tokyo Big Sight, albeit somewhat skewed from an otaku perspective.



Bandai displayed a groovy retro-tastic mockup of the Red Ranger from the first Super Sentai show, 1975's Goranger.





Ultra badass FFVII Cloud and Sephiroth statues from Kotobukiya and Square Enix.





Square Enix continues its Play Arts series of ultra high-grade action figures with characters from Kingdom Hearts II. From left to right, Kairi, Sora, Roxas and Axel.



Mad respect for the Chogokin of yesteryear. Every Super Sentai giant robot, 1980 to present.



At the Sega booth, young lads are enthralled by Mushiking ("Bugking", a line of games and toys playing off the Japanese youth obsession with spiny beetles)...



...and young lassies by Oshare Majo ("Fashionable Witches") Love & Berry. It's a sad fact that most of Sega's revenue these days comes from the above two series. Bugs for boys, frilly dresses for girls. Yeah, reinforce those gender stereotypes, baby!



An advertisement for the upcoming Animal Forest (Animal Crossing) theatrical animated feature.

"Three major trends were identifiable this year: Robots, 'iyashi-kei', or 'healing' toys, and finally 'brain-training'-style toys..."



A moment of "only in Japan" toy zen: The Nekonyanbo ("Catmeowstick"), a simulated cat paw complete with retractable claws and squeezably soft pads. Hey, most Japanese apartments put strict regulations on pets... when a real cat isn't available, surely a disembodied limb will do.



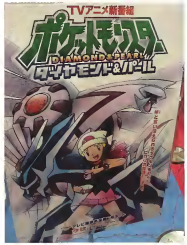


A stunningly detailed Transformers Starscream prototype. Fully transformable and lightyears beyond what you were playing with in the 80s.





Takara Tomy's slightly wonky Pocket Dream Console, a seemingly 16-bit system preloaded with 30 different games. Though it can also be hooked up to a TV, at ¥8400 and with no option for expansion we don't see it posing much of a challenge to the DS or PSP.



A poster for the upcoming Pokémon Diamond & Pearl TV series. No Ash or Pikachu in sight! What can it mean?



Takara Tomy's line of "Let's Build A Secret Base!" PC peripherals. Monitor CPU usage, incoming e-mails, and Shut Down with the press of an ominous, red "The Button"-esque button. Sure to be a hit with casemodders!



The totally rad line of ".s" (pronounced "Dots") toys, allowing one to recreate in three palpable dimensions the three-color, 16x16 sprites of yesteryear.



Bandai was oddly displaying a man behind glass, building Gunpla (Gundam plastic models) for the delight of children everywhere. He was unfortunately not for sale.



Konami's line of Busou Shinki ("Armored God Princess") figures, designed to be used with the PC MMORPG of the same name.



Baroque costumes from TV Aichi's new tokusatsu series, Madan Senki Ryukendo.



Capcom shills for its follow-up to the Rockman (Megaman) EXE series, Ryuusei no Rockman ("Shooting Star Rockman").



Another Only in Japan moment: The Superman/Vader meet-'n'-greet. Dude, check out those *abs!*



The rollicking Sylvanian Families stage show. You know, for kids.

System(s)	GameBoy Advance	Publisher	Nintendo	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Nintendo	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NA

GAME REVIEW

bit Generations

Nintendo takes gaming back to its origins

words Dai Kohama

Nintendo's new line of "bit Generations" games for the GameBoy Advance may be said to be the antithesis of all that gaming is in 2006. After absorbing the complete lineup, each game costing only ¥2000 (about $17) -- Dotstream, Boundish, Dialhex, Coloris, Orbital, Digidrive, Soundvoyager -- I've had to completely rethink what having fun with a video game really *means*. "Are we meant to watch games, or play them?" is the question bit Generations posits, and the answer, this being Nintendo, of course, is "play".

More detailed looks at each game in the series will follow below, but this review will attempt to cover the accumulative experience bit Generations provides. Each game shares a common through line: All strip away everything nonessential to gameplay (other than the music, which is generally quite rich, providing a sharp constraint to the minimalist visuals) allowing for a profound audiovisual experience that might be most favorably compared to hypnosis, or hallucination.

It may sound simultaneously grand and ridiculous...but that's probably just because you haven't played bit Generations yet. These games radiate a confident beauty that stems from their utter simplicity -- Nintendo has consciously removed anything that could serve as a crutch. There are no stories, no polygons, no special effects...hell, there aren't even any *characters*. The experience is 100% gameplay, and in this day and age it feels almost disturbingly fresh, even though my conscious mind tells me most of these games could be pulled of on the Atari 2600.

But that's just it; bit Generations asks you to check your conscious mind at the door. This is interactive entertainment stripped of id and ego. As the games escalate into ever-more mesmerizing patterns of color, light, and sound (pulsing techno rhythms courtesy of some of Japan's top electronica artists), one is reminded of Hal 9000's lament: "I can feel my mind going." Tetsuya Mizuguchi's Rez may have provided a similar experience, but was decidedly more visual than mental. As great as Rez was, it really didn't have a lot of *gameplay* going for it, and bit Generations achieves the same trance-like results not through a bombastic display of pyrotechnics, but through decidedly more nefarious means: Manipulation of your brain via the stimulus of pure gameplay.

"These games radiate a confident beauty that stems from their utter simplicity."

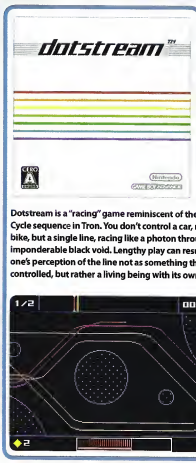
Despite pre-release interest from hipster circles, bit Generations hasn't made a very big splash in Japan. The concept of pure games for games' sake may simply be too far removed from the modern milieu for most people, though everyone I've shown the series to has rushed out and bought at least a few. They're only ¥2000 each...you really can't go wrong. If you're a gamer always on the lookout for something new, know this: What's old is new again. bit Generations is as timeless, and as authentic, as any interactive entertainment experience I've ever had.

bit Generations — SCORE 9.5

+	Brilliantly questions, "what makes video games fun?" -- then answers.
-	Virtually impossibly to put down once you get in a groove.

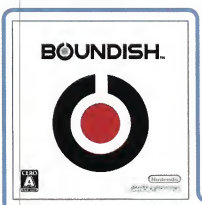


Yes, the graphics are supposed to look like this.



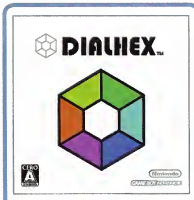
Dotstream is a "racing" game reminiscent of the Light Cycle sequence in Tron. You don't control a car, nor bike, but a single line, racing like a photon through an imponderable black void. Lengthy play can result in one's perception of the line not as something that's being controlled, but rather a living being with its own will.

© 2006 Nintendo



Boundish is a Pong-like game so simple you don't even need to read the instructions. Who knew the addition of a few simple gimmicks and oddly-shaped courts could make hitting a ball back and forth so addictive?





Never before has a game carried a title as appropriate as "Dialhex". Rotating your cursor like the lock on a safe, you create, then destroy, hexagrams of like colors. Rather difficult at first, but vast hypnotic rewards are to be gleaned with practice.





Essentially, Tetris with colors. The brilliance here stems from the fact that it's not simply all about lining up the same color, but using complimentary colors to your advantage as well. Trance-inducing tunes by electronica artist Keigo Oyamada, better known as Cornelius, seal the deal.



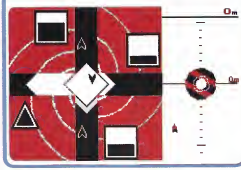


The most original, and in my opinion best, bit Generations game. Virtually impossible to explain, Soundvoyager is a game designed to be played with headphones and eyes closed. That's right – no visual stimuli whatsoever. Relying on music and audio clues alone, you must guide your "avatar" to "dodge" "falling" "obstacles", if such concepts can exist in a purely aural world. Absolutely brilliant.



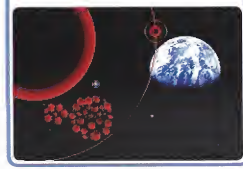


Arguably the most difficult game in the series, Digidrive is a pared-down "traffic simulation" that asks the player to guide five different shapes along four roads, and line them up accordingly. Requiring split-second reflexes, Digidrive is not for the easily distracted.



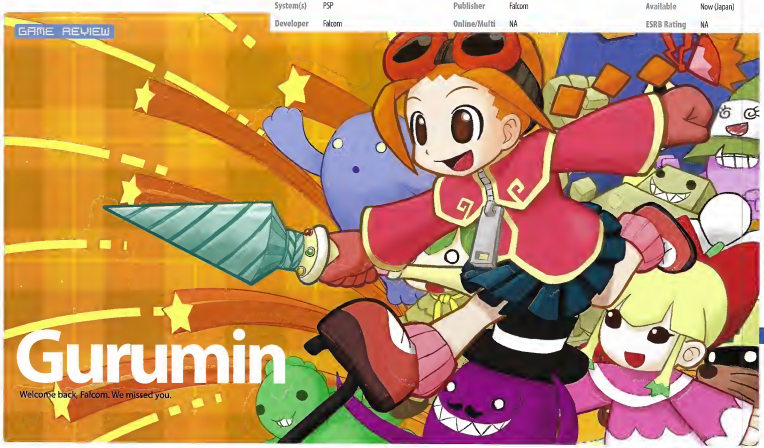


The second-most original game in the lineup, Orbital demands that you take control of the opposing forces of gravity and antigravity to surround your (not directly controllable) planet with satellites, and eventually guide it to the goal.



System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Falcom	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Falcom	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NA

GAME REVIEW



Gurumin

Welcome back, Falcom. We missed you.

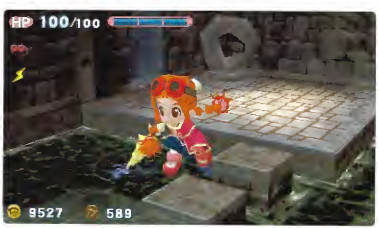
words Dal Kohama

Show of hands, folks. Who remembers Falcom? Most people will probably know the company for Ys, the famed "Kindness RPG" which saw American release on TurboGrafx-16 CD, Sega Master System, and PC (and in Japan on an almost uncountable array of PCs, cellphones, and consoles). Ys is inarguably one of the most influential games of all time. How strange to consider, then, that only two console games have ever actually been *developed and published* by Falcom (Ys V and Kaze no Densetsu Xanadu II), and those only released in Japan -- every Falcom game you've likely ever played has been a port by another company.

Gurumin, on PSP, is their first self-published console game in eleven years. You wanna know a secret? Falcom hasn't gone anywhere, really. They've continued to make dozens of adventures over the last decade in all their major series, albeit exclusively for Japanese PCs. Most have been great. Gurumin was released in December, 2004, and it was better than great. It was also their first non-franchise game in years, and their first fully 3-D game ever. Falcom saw fit to make a port of this game to PSP their console publishing comeback, and to this I can only say "bravo".

I had missed Falcom a lot, and Gurumin reminded me why. The feel, design, aesthetic and concept of Gurumin could come straight from 1993. Before anyone balks, this is a beautiful thing. Remember the true gaming adventures of yesteryear, the kind they pretty much stopped making after Grandia? Remember the innocence? The *kindness*, dare I say it? That's what Gurumin is. It's like Falcom has been operating in a vacuum this last decade; everything except the cel-shaded polygonal graphics hearken back to that time not so long ago when Japanese action RPGs were simpler, and perhaps purer.





Gurumin's story is charmingly retro: Young girl Parin has been sent away to a remote mining town called Teace to live with her grandfather while her archaeologist parents are off excavating a newly-discovered ancient ruin. The little, industrious town is populated by a number of interesting characters, but no children Parin's age. She is surprised one day to find what appears to be a young girl, Pino, being menaced by a stray dog. After saving Pino from the canine threat with a well-timed "Super Super Pretty Missile Kick", Parin learns the girl's secret: She is a ghost, unable to be seen by adults. Pino invites Parin back to the Ghost Home, a parallel world entered via a crack in the alley behind Pino's home. There she meets Pino's brother Puku, as well an entire host of friendly, colorful (both literally and figuratively) ghosts.

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Fate would, of course, choose just such a moment for the *bad* ghosts, known as the Phantoms, to arrive and spirit away almost all of Parin's spectral friends for an unknown purpose their enigmatic leader, the Phantom Prince, seems to suggest has something to do with Parin. Only little Pino manages to evade the ghostnapping, and reveals to Parin another secret: Beneath the Ghost Home lies the Drill of Legend, a weapon used by another human visitor to save the ghosts long before. Parin knows what she must do: Take drill in hand and journey out into the greater Ghost World to save her new friends.

A fairly inconsequential story (again, very old-school), but one perfectly suited to setting up Gurumin's delightfully yesterday gameplay. Put very simply, Gurumin is Ys, tossed around with a bit of Ocarina of Time and Mario 64 for good measure. The structure is very familiar: Upon leaving the Ghost Home, Parin arrives on a giant world map peppered with wonderfully designed dungeons playable in nonlinear order, full of traps, puzzles and traditional Falcom giant boss encounters. To combat the evil Phantoms Parin has a surprising amount of control over her Legendary Drill, with multiple combos, Story of Thor-style fighting game-esque special attacks, and elemental powerups gained as the story progresses. The game is somewhat short, at around 15 hours or so, comparing favorably with the Ys series, though perhaps a little short for some tastes. Thankfully Gurumin does offer a lot of replayability; it fairly bursts with optional quests, minigames, and side encounters, there are two endings, Parin's moves and equipment upgrades can be carried over into a new game, and there are multiple hidden modes, costumes, and even an entirely different playable character unlockable.

Gurumin's enchanting throwback gameplay is effortlessly grafted onto a lean, attractive modern 3-D engine...surprising, given Falcom's lack of experience in the area. Models are tight, textures attractive and pyrotechnic effects abundant. It may have been only mildly impressive on PC, but on PSP Gurumin immediately becomes one of the better-looking games the system has to offer. And then there's the music. I don't think even Square can match Falcom's anonymous Sound Team JDK (without question the most prolific game soundtrack "artist" of all time) for consistency of quality over the years; their trademark sugar-coated pop sound fairly screams "VIDEO GAME" in a particular, synth-heavy way that no other company has dared to flirt with since the 90s. In many ways the soundtrack is just as hermetically sealed as the gameplay, like a time capsule from a long-lost PC Engine CD game. It is magnificent in a way the banal, melody-free "atmospheric" game music of today is not.

The total package Gurumin presents – lovable game structure of yore, ready-for-primetime 3-D graphics – would have made for a great game on PS2 (truth be told, it kicks Ys VI's ass), and on the PSP with its still-lean lineup it feels like a masterpiece. Falcom has reminded us resoundingly that they still exist; hopefully Gurumin will lead to more console games. In the meantime, somebody (hello Atlus, hello NIS) absolutely has to get this game released in America. It's simply too good, and too honest a gaming experience to pass up.

"Gurumin's enchanting throwback gameplay is effortlessly grafted onto a lean, attractive modern 3-D engine."







Gurumin

score 8.5

\+ Classic Falcom gaming reborn in a 21st-century package.

\– Depending on taste, quest can be a little short.







Slowly but surely gaming is getting back to its happy place.

GAME REVIEWS

Smile of the Goddess DS

Ertain wants to teach the world to laugh

System	Nintendo DS	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Ertain	Available	Now (Japan)
Publisher	Ertain	ESRB Rating	NA



Boke and *Tsukkomi* are the two essential halves of traditional Japanese two-man *Manzai* comedy teams, essentially equatable to the "funny man" and "straight man" of Western Abbott and Costello-style standup. How shocked I was to learn the concept was no longer mainstream in Western comedy. The conversation with Nick went something like this:

"If there's no Boke and Tsukkomi, how do you do Manzai?"

"Dude! There *is* no Manzai in America!"

That's Boke/Tsukkomi comedy in a nutshell. One guy makes dumb mistakes, the other corrects him, often with a well-timed blow to the head. It may seem to make for simple comedy, but in Japan the style is regarded as an art-form, and it's almost surprising Manzai had never been made into a game before Smile of the Goddess. The story is absurd: You take control of a rookie Manzai team, Tsukkomi Ikki Banjo and Boke Chitose Makimura, who are on a mission to seal away nasty demons via the power of comedy. Whatever, dude. What I care about is the actual gameplay, and it's pretty interesting. Ikki and Chitose perform fully-voiced Manzai routines, and you have to determine the correct Tsukkomi responses to proceed. You don't just select them, however; each is determined by a lightning-quick minigame that doesn't spoil the flow of the routine. Obviously Smile of the Goddess will be impenetrable for non-Japanese speakers, but for those who can hang with the language it's a light, original romp. **Dai Kohama**

Megami no Etsubo DS (Smile of the Goddess DS)

score 6.5

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The A-Ha! Experience

The most giddily frustrating game of all time

System	PSP	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Sega	Available	Now (Japan)
Publisher	Sega	ESRB Rating	NA





Sega's The A-Ha! Experience is perhaps most fun when you first introduce it to a friend. Cries of "No way, dude!" and "That's impossible!" are sure to abound...and that's exactly what the creator of the game, Professor Kenichiro Mogi, of Sony Computer Science Laboratory, wants. You see, A-Ha! is a game that plays with humans' powers of perception. You're shown a single image which gradually changes over the course of 20 seconds (see screenshots for an example). You then have to determine what, exactly, changed. Sounds like the simplest game ever, right? Think again. The human mind is infamously poor at catching changes that happen gradually, and finding exactly what's been altered between the two photos can often take upwards of 30 tries. When you finally *do* figure it out, that's the "A-Ha! Experience" -- a peak moment of perception, according to Prof. Mogi. There you go. That's the entire game. No amount of description can bring the point home of how simultaneously frustrating and rewarding A-Ha! is...you really do have to discover it for yourself. I guarantee your first "A-Ha!" moment will make you an addict. **Dai Kohama**

A-Ha! Taiken (The A-Ha! Experience)

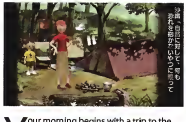
score 7.5

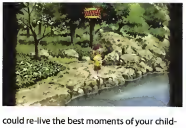
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My Summer Vacation Portable

Totoro-like Japanese childhood nostalgia

System	PSP	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Sony Computer Entertainment	Available	Now (Japan)
Publisher	Sony Computer Entertainment	ESRB Rating	NA





Your morning begins with a trip to the town square, where you perform calisthenics in time with the government's radio announcements. Upon returning home, you might water the morning glories, eat a breakfast of rice and fish, then proceed to do your homework. With that out of the way the rest of the day is yours, to play with friends, catch bugs, fish, or just plain go exploring... until the sunset cicadas in the trees start to call, and it's time to come home once again for a good night's rest. Sound familiar? Probably not, unless you grew up in Japan during the 70s or 80s. This was exactly what my summer vacations were like, and Sony's My Summer Vacation Portable is a wonderfully nostalgic simulation of that bygone age. Imagine if you could re-live the best moments of your childhood, perfectly idyllic, pastoral, and viewed through the most rosy of lenses. That's what this game offers, and in spades. Ultimately there is no real goal, similar to Nintendo's Animal Crossing, though eventually the vacation does come to an end. My Summer Vacation is all about the experience, and I wholeheartedly recommend it to any Japanophiles out there curious about how your *Nihonjin* peers whiled away their childhoods. **Dai Kohama**

Boku no Natsuyasumi Portable (My Summer Vacation Portable)

score 7.0

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Together Anywhere: Let's School!

Toro is back nya!!

System	PSP	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Sony Computer Entertainment	Available	Now (Japan)
Publisher	Sony Computer Entertainment	ESRB Rating	NA





Sony's line of Together Anywhere games used to be so popular, their trademark Pocket People characters once even made regular appearances on Fuji TV's news programs. Such days may be long gone, but the sheer quality of the long-awaited series reboot, Together Anywhere: Let's School! just might bring them back. The central conceit of this new installment is simple: You play as the unseen teacher in a school full of familiar Pocket People like cat mascot Toro and gay dog Pierre, and teach them words. That's right...you teach them words. The simple joy this game offers comes when the students turn the things you taught them back on you in ways you never imagined, forming new slang and hitherto-unimagined uses for silly words you patiently explained to them. It's all very Monty Python -- for instance, my students fell in love with the words "Gorgonzola" and "Moé Anime", for some reason. Again, a game impossible to play without knowledge of Japanese, but a delightfully surreal and original one. **Dai Kohama**

Dokodemo Issho: Let's Gakkou! (Together Anywhere: Let's School!)

score 8.0

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Released by	FUNimation	Running Time	100 minutes
Rating	TV PG	Available	August 29

Moon Phase

Love at first bite

Dave Halverson



Fortunately for occult photographer Kohei Morioka, he can't see dead people, making him very good at his job and the perfect candidate to enter Schwartz Quelle Castle to snap a few photos when he's compelled to return after spotting a mysterious girl perched high upon the castle walls. Hidden deep within the German countryside and haunted by victims of the Black Death, anyone who's ever entered Schwartz Quelle has met their end, but Kohei strolls right in, as his editor Hiromi and Japan's leading spiritual medium Seiji Mido wait outside. Immune to the spirits taunting his every move, Kohei finds his petite princess, Hazuki (a.k.a. Mistress Luna), in short order who wastes no time in sinking her tiny fangs into his neck, much to the chagrin of Vigo, the deity Hazuki's mother placed in charge when she abandoned her at the castle two years prior. At this point Moon Phase appears solemn, melancholy, and seemingly headed down a dark path… But don't get comfortable just yet. Hazuki's bite—her first—was supposed to turn Kohei into her slave for eternity, however, little does she know she's just sucked the blood of Japan's most paranormally retarded citizen, so, no deal. Kohei feels compelled to help the now visibly shaken (if not a little bitchy) little vampire though, and so with a little help from Seiji they lay the spiritual smack down on Vigo and take Hazuki back to Japan to help her find her mother. Within the span of two episodes, events segue from creepy to cute, followed by a spot of drama… Back at Hazuki's place things don't get any easier for our little blood sucker. Kohei's grandfather is as immune to her charms as he is, and after an argument with Kohei she makes a move unbefitting to a vampire that could have serious repercussions. Meanwhile, skeletons come rolling out of Kohei's closet and the see-saw squeaks on.

Moon Phase is a gorgeous show, beautifully animated, detailed, colored and scored. The schizophrenic pace only adds to the intrigue, so I hope it holds while edging slightly more towards the dark side. Never knowing what's around the corner…could be a demon, could be a hot spring—makes this as intriguing a new series as I've seen this year. **play**

"The schizophrenic pace only adds to the intrigue, so I hope it holds while edging slightly more towards the dark side."

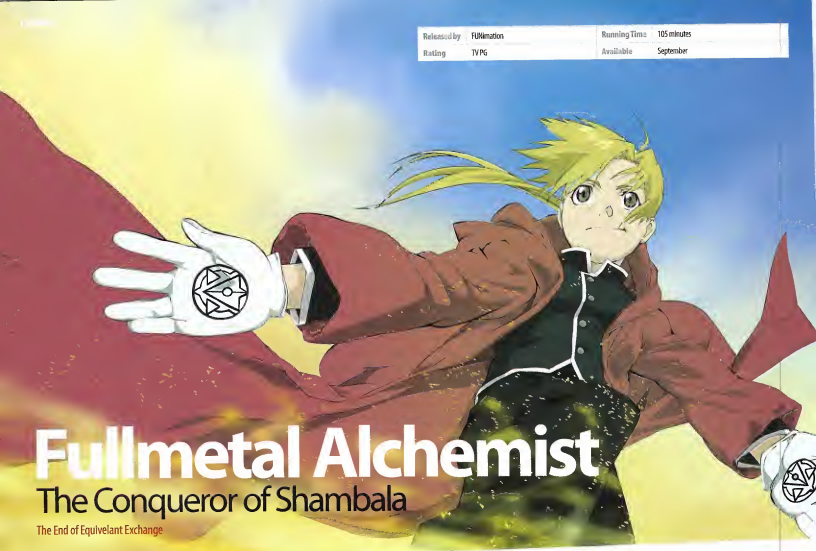
Moon Phase: Volume 1

SCORE **8.0**

+	Vampires. Everybody loves vampires. And this is a cute one.
–	A little too warm and fuzzy at times.


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Released by	FUNimation	Running Time	105 minutes
Rating	TV PG	Available	September



Fullmetal Alchemist

The Conqueror of Shambala

The End of Equivelant Exchange

Heather Campbell



"it's actually impossible to talk about the plot of Conqueror without revealing key details about the final three episodes"

If you're a fan of Anime Television Series, then you are probably familiar with the disenchantment you feel after the inevitable film finale. Popular Television Anime Shows bring in lots of fans, and studios try and satisfy everyone with overblown Popular Television Anime Movies. However, TV Anime that ends in, or includes, a cinematic outing oftentimes overextends itself, or takes on too many plots, or is simply too presumptuous.

For example, fans of *Rurouni Kenshin* are familiar with the let-down that was *Samurai X: The Movie* – a film which undid the title character's defining characteristic under the cheapest of circumstances. Or *Cowboy Bebop*'s film; stylish, yet overlong. Then there are the re-imaginings, like *Revolutionary Girl Utena* – a vibrant film full of metaphor that simply could not satisfy those looking for narrative resolution. Or *Escaflowne* – stuffy, arrogant, and unnecessary.

Either these movies try too much, or are afraid to try at all.

Of course, there's always *End of Evangelion*. It's a masterpiece, but not the kind of movie you can sit down and watch on a Sunday afternoon.

So it is with great trepidation that one drops in the DVD of *Fullmetal Alchemist: The Conqueror of Shambala*. *Fullmetal Alchemist* has been a measured, excellently executed television anime throughout. The narrative has never faltered; even in "filler" episodes, plot was dolled out in tiny drops. Characters were well-designed and engaging. The show was full of angst and comedy, action and heart. After such an exceptional series, it's easy to be afraid of the movie. After all, TV anime movies tend to suck. A lot.

But *The Conqueror of Shambala* can easily be called the most satisfying conclusion a television anime has ever received. Introducing new villains, and giving fanservice battles with old ones, the *Fullmetal* Movie gives us a large measure of what we loved in FMA, while deftly dispensing new narrative and tension. Complicated, but never over-extended, *Conqueror* gives fans exactly what they want, and keeps more than a few surprises up its sleeve.

Conqueror feels like a classic from the moment it starts. After a brief prologue, we are introduced to the plot proper. The tone shifts, and so does the style of the animation. The color palate has been muted throughout much of the movie, giving the film a brown-grey-green pastel feel, not unlike a Ghibli feature.

Now, it's hard to go into details about the film, for fear of ruining what may be the most surprising end of to a television anime series. As the final DVDs haven't been released yet, it's actually impossible to talk about the plot of *Conqueror* without revealing key details about the final three episodes of the television show itself. That being said, the movie playfully expounds on the idea of double-worlds, giving us happy reunions with both enemies and friends alike, on the other side of The Gate.

That may be all I can say about the story.

Furthermore, those who haven't seen the show will be completely lost. Even a recap of major ideas is pretty near useless to a new viewer. Telling the audience, "Ed lost his arm, and that armor over there has a soul inside," doesn't provide enough to anchor them in the complicated, political world of *Fullmetal Alchemist*. It would be like a Cliff's Notes version of *Lord of the Flies* that simply said, "There was an island, and stuff." New viewers beware: there's a fifty-one episode introduction to the events of the film.

Old fans will be more than satisfied, however. *Conqueror of Shambala* is a heartfelt ending stuffed full of action sequences; this is what everyone loves about *Fullmetal Alchemist*, and more. And wow, is it nice to hear that music in 5.1 Surround Sound. **play**

Fullmetal Alchemist: The Conqueror of Shambala SCORE **9.0**

\+ Elegant, funny, action-packed and well-animated, this is the conclusion we've been waiting for.

\- Those who haven't seen the show might as well watch scrambled cable feeds for two hours

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Legacy

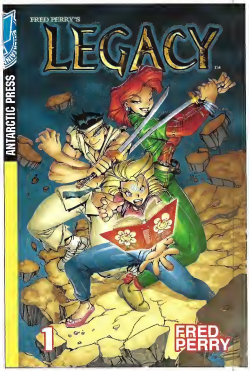
Revenge of the nerd

Publisher	Antarctic Press	Genre	Action/Adventure	Volume	1
Story	Fred Perry	Art	Fred Perry	Rating	13+

The Wrath destroyed everything Timeron ever loved, including his only son. He fought to the end to put an end to the Wrath—fighting with his trusted allies and Silvia the woman he loved. Now Timeron's Fighting Legacy has manifested itself in arcade game fighting master Joe Dumar and his twin sister Vicky who, with a little help from a 9-year-old Indian girl guided by the Wizard's Legacy, will take up the torch along with Tracy, heir to Silvia's Acrobats Legacy who must ponder whether her passion for Joe is passed on from Sylvia or genuine. So what's the Wrath? How about a guy named Poindexter Nerdimeier, super geek. The penultimate villain—His body allows the Wrath's influence on the world as he transforms and controls all that he distorts into Wrath Shadows— everyday people twisted by the archessence of the Wrath—who in turn strengthen and power him…So much for the meek inheriting the Earth. Legacy is a game/superhero fan's dream come true. Imagine leaving the arcade and actually becoming Ryu! Stunning Fred Perry art and amazing color by Joe Weltjens combine to make Legacy one of the most electrifying action-adventure manga of the year. **DH**

Read it if... Canned superheroes have you more inclined to read the Captain Crunch box than comics. This here is a gem folks.





Warrior Nun Areala

These nuns could become habit forming

Publisher	Antarctic Press	Genre	Adventure
Volume	1	Rating	13+
Story	Ben Dunn	Art	Ben Dunn

Try this on for size: In a world where hell has risen up, the Catholic church has had to take extreme measure to quell the pervasive evil. Magic priests and warrior nuns do more than pray, they prey, vanquishing all who would threaten the sanctity of the Church. Sister Shannon Masters, a newly trained warrior nun, gets more than anyone bargained for when her first assignment lands her in the middle of a New York City-wide sacrifice to call forth Satan. Her death is swift, but her resurrection sweet as she emerges from Heaven as Areala, endowed with the powers of the first warrior nun. Time to kick hell's ass or die trying. Kick-ass clergy and hell spawns by Ben Dunn in vivid color…what are you waiting for? **DH**

Read it if... You've been waiting to see heaven and hell finally get it on!



Fallen angel or bad ass biker bitch? You be the judge.

I Hunt Monsters

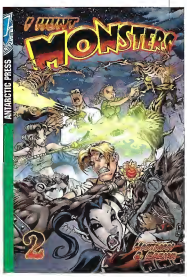
Where there's Will there's a way

Publisher	Antarctic Press	Genre	Action/Adventure
Volume	1	Rating	13+
Created by	Rod Espinosa and Craig Babiar		

Poor Will Warlock…If he'd only known how he'd be spending his days post-college, he might have taken curriculum to include demon-slaying. But who's got time for hindsight when you discover that you're the leader of the Warlock Clan charged with holding back the pervasive forces of evil? Lucky for him he's got some formidable help: Aarna of the Sorcerer Clan, Delilah a seductive vampire who fights on the side of good, Tayesha, Will's rich beautiful commando-cum-friend from college, and, of course grandpa, who rises from the grave to bring Will up to speed on the family tree and something about the gates of hell pouring into the physical realm. This is a stellar manga…phenomenal character design, amazing details and so well-written it practically reads itself. **DH**

Read it if... You like any of the following: Beautiful girls, uber-sexy gothic beauties, splattering monsters, remarkable art.

"...he might have taken curriculum to include demon-slaying."



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** Artwork subject to change*

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Interview with Jennifer Sekiguchi

GunXSword // Geneon Entertainment

Interview by Heather Campbell

Jennifer Sekiguchi loves anime. She's been the American voice actress behind more than 35 anime releases within the last 6 years, and she seems to have loved every show she's been involved in. I caught up with her at Anime Expo '06, where she lit up the room like a sparkler. With a buoyant and charming smile, Jennifer told me why she liked GunXSword, Cosplay … and everything else. Except platform games.

play: Hey, how are you?
I'm pretty good! You're from Play magazine?

Yes.
That's video games, right? And anime?

Yes. Are you a gamer?
I'd be a poser if I said I was a gamer. I'm not good at video games, but I like to play some of them. They're usually the girly games. I'm bad at FPS, and I get scared easily. I bought The Suffering, but I couldn't finish it.

Also, I'm really bad at platformers, because my thumbs won't make a straight line. My character goes … "waaah!" And that's a death. I'm a huge Buffy fan, but had to ask a friend to come beat the jumping level for me.

Then the Wii will be perfect for you.
Really? Very cool!

You use your hands instead of your thumbs.
Then that's what I have to get.

So, what can you tell me about GunXSword?
Well, I play Wendy. I know this going to sound cliché because I'm here to promote it, but I actually think it's a cool show! I'm somewhat of a fan-girl. The first year that I was introduced to anime was the first year that *Evangelion* came out, when *Escaflowne* came out in Japan –

So, '95 then?
It was like, 1996. And then, *Bebop* was around that time, so in the beginning, I was like, "it's all good!" Then I saw more stuff, and it was … not so good. There were a few times that I had to stay up all night watching, like the Shishio arc in *Kenshin*.

Wow, you are a fan-girl!
(Laughs). But *GunXSword*, I watched the first volume, and it reminds me of *Bebop*, in a way. Each episode has a style to it. Van is different from Spike, but there's a cool-factor there. You kinda have a crush on him, because he's so cool. But goofy.

"I'd be a poser if I said I was a gamer. I'm not good at video games, but I like to play some of them."





You were a fan in '95. How did you get involved in the industry?
I was involved in production, but I'd always been an actor. I was just out of high-school, and had done community theater with my friends ... and the company I worked for got *I'm Gonna Be an Angel*, and I begged to audition for it, and they said, "No."

But after two weeks, they still didn't have anyone for the role of Silky, and they said, "Why don't you go in there and read for it?" And I got it.

But for both that and *Furi Kuri*, I didn't get paid for voice acting. Because I was on staff. But I was so happy; I was totally thrilled to be a part of it.

And then, in '97, I went to my first Anime Expo.

That was when it was still in the basement of the LAX Hilton?
Yeah!

That was my first AX, too.
We're the same generation! It was a lot less corporate. And there were a lot less Cosplayers.

(Pause) Do you ...
Yes, I have Cosplayed before. (Laughs) But I did it so early on; I remember the first time doing it, I was standing there thinking, "I feel really stupid." I turned to my Japanese friend and said, "Are you sure they do this in Japan?"
Now it's like half-and-half.
Yeah, everyone is a Cosplayer. It's so bad that one time, when I was at a restaurant, I saw this pilot in uniform, and instead of thinking, "Oh, it's a pilot," I thought, "Who's he dressed as?"

Who did you dress as?
I dressed up as Misao, from *Kenshin*. The other thing I dressed up as was Sana, from *Kodocha*. There's this episode where Sana builds a wooden, rectangular thing that sits on her waist – she calls it the "anti-kissing wheel." I wore that! And she had all this trouble, in the show, getting through doors, and at AX, I had the same problems. I couldn't get through any doors!

What's your favorite anime of all time?
That's hard. I have a bunch. I really like *Eva*. And *Kodocha* is a real favorite of mine. And ... there's this old-school show, *Mahojin Guru Guru*. And *Akachan to Boku* – it's about this boy who has to raise his kid brother.

Of the newer stuff I'm working on, I'm really into *Naruto*, too.

You're Hinata, right?
Yes. And I'm really into *Hare + Guu*. And *Furi Kuri*, of course. That's my taste, I guess, if you can piece it together.

It sounds like you enjoy shows that are either really funny, or terribly depressing.
Yeah! Funny/weird or really depressing! (laughs)

Is there a character in classic anime that you wish you could have voiced?
When *Kodocha* came out, a lot of people knew I really loved that show. But I loved it so much that I didn't want to be in it. I would have loved to play Sana, but then I would also not want to do it. There was one show that I actually wanted to be in: *Ayashi no Ceres*. Actually, there's a lot of classic anime that I haven't seen yet, like *Grave of the Fireflies*.

Since you like depressing anime, you'll really enjoy that one.
Yeah! But you have to be in the right mood to see it.

Back to GunXSword, what would you say is the most surprising thing about Wendy?
On the surface, she's your typical, young-ish heroine. But – and I would say this about all the characters in GunXSword – they have background, and they have depth. Wendy has this idea that the world is a good place, and that's her motivation. That's why she's spunky and determined and adamant.

I'm actually looking forward to a later episode; there's a GunXSword poster with a group of sultry, slinky women in bathing suits, and Wendy is in the middle, embarrassed and uncomfortable. But that's who she is, and the show is very true and honest with her character.

So, when you dub an anime, do you watch the entire show before hand, or do you watch them as you go?
Most of the time you watch them as you dub them. Certain studios will give you scripts beforehand. And then, some actors will try to find...versions of it before the release. I try to do that, but it takes a lot of time to watch anime, and now-a-days, it's harder to get, because they're technically illegal. I purchase my own copies if I don't get them ahead-of-time, too.

Have you ever been surprised about plot revelations during the dubbing process?
Yeah. There'll be times where I'm reading a script, and I'm like, "Did I just die!? But I come back, right!?" **play**

"There's this episode where Sana builds a wooden, rectangular thing that sits on her waist – she calls it the "anti-kissing wheel." I wore that!"

The Embalmer

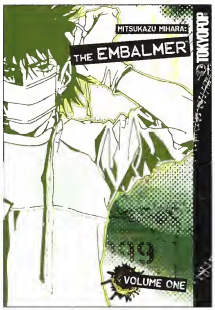
Post Mortem

Publisher	TokyoPop	Genre	Drama
Volume	1	Rating	16+
Story	Mitsukazu Mihara	Art	Mitsukazu Mihara

"Interesting tales, and a fantastic enigma."

Dealing with the dead isn't the most glamorous of jobs-- even if you're an embalmer, trying to make them look good for their trip six feet under. Shinjyurou takes to task the culturally unacceptable position, and through his work helps those who have lost to find hope in living. Interesting tales, and a fantastic enigma in the passive protagonist. **JD**

Read it if... it's a fresh concept, even if it's about the dead.



See you when you're dead.

Oz: The Manga

We're off to see a different wizard

Publisher	Antarctic Press	Genre	Fantasy
Volume	1	Rating	13+
Story	David Hutchinson	Art	David Hutchinson

"Note: don't screw with the Tin Woodsman."

Originally published in separate installments through 2005, David Hutchinson's adaptation of the original L. Frank Baum novel expertly weaves through a majority of the story, adding in most of the characters you probably never knew existed from watching that movie-- the hard-headed Quadlings, the crow/wolf/hornet armies of the West's Wicked Witch, and China Country, land of fragile things, to name a few. Its lighter fare, but still retains the darkness that Baum was known to write in from time to time... Note: don't screw with the Tin Woodsman-- that axe doesn't just chop wood. **JD**

Read it if... you might be intrigued to learn the hidden pasts of the heroes and villains you thought you knew.



Golgo 13: Supergun

Hail to the Duke

Publisher	Viz Media	Genre	Action
Volume	1	Rating	18+
Story	Takao Saito	Art	Takao Saito

"He loves the women, and he always gets the job done."

He's has the talent, he loves the women, and he always gets the job done right. Freelance sniper Duke Togo is given the mission to stop a long-range cannon hidden in Iraq pointed at Washington D.C., and also prevent it from destroying the dam its hiding in once he does. It reads more like a Tom Clancy novel as a manga-- the good Golgo 13 stories are more about the drama than the action, and that's evident in the backup story. Every page is solid narrative. A little light on Togo's appearance, but it works as a strength here. **JD**

Read it if... It's Golgo 13. He's everything the armchair jockey dreamed to be.



Shrine of the Morning Mist

Sister act

Publisher	Tokyopop	Genre	Fantasy/Action
Volume	1	Rating	13+
Story	Hiroki Ugawa	Art	Hiroki Ugawa

"The comedy is still just as sharp as the anime..."

Finally, the original manga version of one of last year's most enjoyable anime comedy actioners has been released. Three sisters with their spiritual powers vow to protect their recently arrived cousin Tadahiro, who's got strange links to the demon world that he doesn't even understand. The comedy is still just as sharp as the anime, but the manga as a whole is a little more introspective, so you have to be patient for the laughs. The characters and story come off very believable-- even if there are demon attacks to fend off. **JD**

Read it if... you love evildoers run over by cars in the middle of their speeches.





Forget Everything You (think) You Know

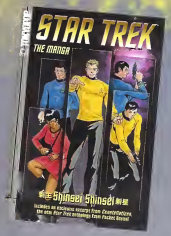
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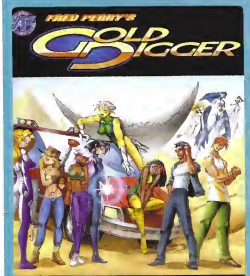
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watch this



Gold Digger

Publisher: AP Entertainment | **Disc:** DVD | **Rating:** BR

Experience this PDF-packed GD-ROM, a Mac/PC compatible DVD loaded to the gills with 15 years of Fred Perry's epic Gold Digger Comic series...over 3000 pages! If you know Gina, Cheetah, Brianna and co., now is most definitely the time! www.apmanga.com

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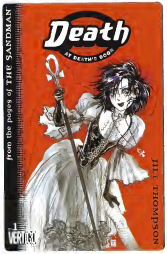
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Air Gear

Publisher: Del Rey | **Volume:** 1
Rating: 16+ | **Genre:** Action/Drama

The latest from Del Rey's 16+ stable asks "Wanna Fly?" And trust us, you do. Jet Set Radio meets high-school drama vs. ...the Yakuza? Lucky for Itsuki, his 2 roommates the sexy Noyamano sisters have a few tricks up their sleeves (when they're wearing any).



Death: At Death's Door

Publisher: Vertigo | **Volume:** 1
Rating: Mature Readers | **Genre:** Horror/Comedy

From Vertigo comes this tome/manga based on The Sandman: Season of Mists in which a throne is vacated, the Sandman inherits the key to hell and his sister, Death, ends up with hell spilling out into her apartment. Somehow it's hilarious. Death's a real cutie too.



Tomb Raider

Publisher: Bandai | **Volume:** 1
Rating: 13+ | **Genre:** Adventure

No Lara fan will want to be without Bandai's Tomb Raider Tankoban Vol. 1, a compilation of the Tomb Raider graphic novels in manga form. 240 pages of action-adventure and beautiful art for the discerning Tomb Raider.



Q-Ko-Chan The Earth Invader Girl

Publisher: Del Rey | **Volume:** 1
Rating: 13+ | **Genre:** Action/Comedy

Kirio couldn't care less that war is a pervasive part of everyday life on Earth...right up until a cute little girl who also happens to be a broken giant robot lands in her front yard and asks her to please mount her... From the creators of FLCL, Q-Ko-Chan is a MUST read.



SVC Chaos

Publisher: DrMaster | **Volume:** 4
Rating: 13+ | **Genre:** Action

The 4th explosive, full-color graphic novel in DrMaster's SVC Chaos SNK vs. Capcom saga is bursting with excitement. Genjuro and Dimitri even get into the act! You don't want to miss Earthquake's Special Technique Fat Burst do you? There goes the o-zone layer!



Halo

Publisher: Marvel | **Volume:** GN Compilation
Rating: 17+ | **Genre:** Action/Adventure

A conglomeration of 4 short stories (think Animatrix in book form) 2 of which I could live without, it matters not thanks to The Last Voyage of the Infinite Succor, from Lee Hammock & Simon Bisley (Bisley doing Halo is a true gift) and the stellar gallery.

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FUNIMATION ENTERTAINMENT

Silent Hill

Movie: Extras:

Directed by: Christophe Gans
Starring: Radha Mitchell, Sean Bean, Laurie Holden
Released By: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment
Rated:

Considered heretics by the local cult, when a West Virginia woman, Dahlia Gillespie, surrenders her daughter Alessa for "cleansing" (she's burned alive), her charred remains, clinging to life, emanate such seething hatred that she summons the devil himself to exact her revenge, who appears as her evil twin and casts the town into a parallel dimension where her perpetrators are made to pay for their atrocities in an eternal cycle of ribald evil. The devil drives a hard bargain but he always delivers his end of the deal. 30 years later the goodness left in Alessa (and let this be a lesson to all adoptive parents—never adopt from a sienna-toned Catholic barracks) is reborn into a young girl, Sharon, who as the story begins is beckoned to Alessa's side for the final showdown in Silent Hill.

This is as good an adaptation of the game as I can imagine actually getting made in Hollywood. Roger Avery has definitely respected the material while molding something palatable to a mainstream horror audience and Christophe Gans has taken his love for the original game to a place few adaptations ever aspire. **DH**





The Boondocks
The Complete First Season

Episodes: Extras:

Created by: Aaron McGruder
Starring: Regina King, John Witherspoon, Mike Epps, Charles Q. Murphy
Released By: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment
Rated: Not Rated

"Jesus was black, Ronald Reagan was the devil, and the government is lying about 911, thank you for your time, and goodnight". Those were the first words we heard from Huey, a 10-year-old African American boy uprooted from Chicago's seedy underbelly and moved to an upscale white neighborhood by his granddad/legal guardian. It's just a dream (that makes white folks riot) but that's Huey, and he doesn't stop at white folks—not even close. Aaron McGruder takes on every taboo in the book, and few that have yet to be written, in The Boondocks, the most socially relevant and laugh-out-loud funny cartoon since South Park. The combination of McGruder's comedy and LeSean Thomas's art direction are an unstoppable force of animated nature. Commercial-free and packed with great extras (deleted scenes, unaired promos, commentaries, behind-the-scenes featurette) this is a DVD collection no American should be without. **DH**



Lucky Number Slevin

Movie: Extras:

Directed by: Paul McGuigan
Starring: Josh Hartnett, Morgan Freeman, Sir Ben Kingsley, Bruce Willis, Lucy Liu, Stanley Tucci
Released By: Lions Gate Films
Rated:

There's nothing worse than a case of mistaken identity-- especially when it involves organized crime. Slevin can tell you that. He's hanging out at his friend Nick's place in NYC for a while after a bout of bad luck, only he seems to have skipped out and left Slevin holding the bag-- or rather, Nick's very large gambling debt. Next thing you know, Slevin is caught on both sides of the fence of a very long and bitter mob war.

The impressive cast it's put to good use. Morgan Freeman and Ben Kingsley go against type for rival crime lords, though their actual endeavors aren't exactly explained in the film. Bruce Willis, does what's best these days as a stoic hitman, Lucy Liu as the cute coroner-next-door, and Josh Hartnett as the title character comes off cocksure without pretentiousness.

However the dialogue, with it's thick doublespeak and motormouth delivery causes the rewind button to be pressed frequently just to soak in the point the characters are trying to make before the next one hits. The movie clocks in at



roughly two hours, but feels like its trying to be too witty too fast. The twist ending won't surprise fans of the genre-- it can be picked out nearly a half-hour before it's end for a keen observer. There's a lot of plot points left to chance as well, and the storyline lightly mimics that of *Yojimbo*, or to a more modern incarnation *Last Man Standing* where Willis played the lead ironically-- apparently it's a popular narrative for him. Standard extras-- two commentaries, deleted and behind-the-scenes with alternate ending (which gratefully wasn't used). It merits a second viewing-- if only to decrypt the conversations. Between dynamic characters, clever banter, and a stellar cast, the movie executes well for a neo-noir crime drama, making *Slevin* worth picking up on a lark. **Jim Dewey**

BACK OF THE BOOK



09_06 DAVE HALVERSON
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

We're so "Hollywood"

It seems like the bigger gaming gets, the bigger budgets swell, and on more occasions than not, the bigger the losses as a result. Do bigger budgets really equate to better games? I suppose it depends on what you consider a good game…which brings us back to Hollywood. Why do blockbusters like, say Fantastic Four or Pirates of the Caribbean 2—both panned by critics—break the bank while other, far better films, like, say, Kingdom of Heaven or V for Vendetta barely break the 50-million mark? Why did Daredevil take in more than the far, far (far, far, far) better Hellboy? Why does an indie movie about penguins make more than an indie film about global warming?

Now let's draw some parallels. Why do blockbuster games like, say Fantastic Four or Pirates of the Caribbean: Legend of Jack Sparrow—both panned by critics—break the bank while other, far better games, like, say Psychonauts or Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath barely break even, if that? Why did rushed Activision ports sell more than the amazing Rare-built Kameo when the 360 launched? And why does a game about dogs make them all look like puppy chow?

The simple fact is no one knows for sure what's going to hit and what's going to miss. You can stuff free pizza down the throat of every focus group in the known universe and still have no idea how America is going to react. And you know why? Because gaming, no matter how big, is niche (there are just more of them) and the majority of Americans, borderline comatose. You have to lead them to water or they'll cease functioning. Sadly, as the number of gamers grows so does the common denominator, which includes… Yep, those people, and these mega-publishers need every penny they don't spend on pizza rolls and gin.

Considering the number of viable consoles—DS, GBA, PSP, PS2, Xbox 360, GameCube, and PC—how many people own more than one, and given how much expendable income they have, is it any wonder that the market has become so diluted, unpredictable, and downright screwy?

Logic would dictate that it would be wiser to choose a niche and focus on it, rather than chase the mass market, but logic and gaming don't mix. Take Okami for instance: probably one of the greatest games of the year, if not all time. The game is clearly designed for core gamers (who apparently spent so much of their youth playing games they've grown up poor) while being so good that it may recruit some new ones as well. I'm going to guess that it needs to sell a paltry 150 to 200,000 copies to be considered a success for Capcom (which it probably won't do). Meanwhile, a given brand name game, turd or otherwise, will sell that in a week. Ten years ago Okami would have sold a million copies, as would have Psychonauts, Beyond Good and Evil, Stranger's Wrath and so on, and those turds would have gotten their comeuppance. So, are we to believe that people have become so lazy and/or ill-informed even in the digital age that they would deprive themselves of a fantastic journey and choose a frustrating mess instead? Sadly, yes…and no. See…no one knows! God of War was hyper-niche core gamer, and it kicked ass. What the f*&%? You could go crazy trying to figure it out!

I suppose it's a lot like the fact that Scary Movie 4 made many times what Alexander did. Critics saw all the beautiful people and panned it because it made them look more like ogres than they already are and they flipped out. But people listened. They tried the same thing with Pirates 2 and it blew up in their face.

I could go on all day…Why do WAY more people watch American Idol than Rockstar? Why did Star Trek last a lifetime and Serenity a season? Why will Konami make another mediocre 3D Castlevania for console when they could make a 2D Symphony sequel for half as much that would sell twice as many? Why is Oddworld gone when (insert crap developer of your choice here) is still making games? Why does anything called "the soul patrol" even exist? We're so Hollywood.

"The simple fact is no one knows for sure what's going to hit and what's going to miss."


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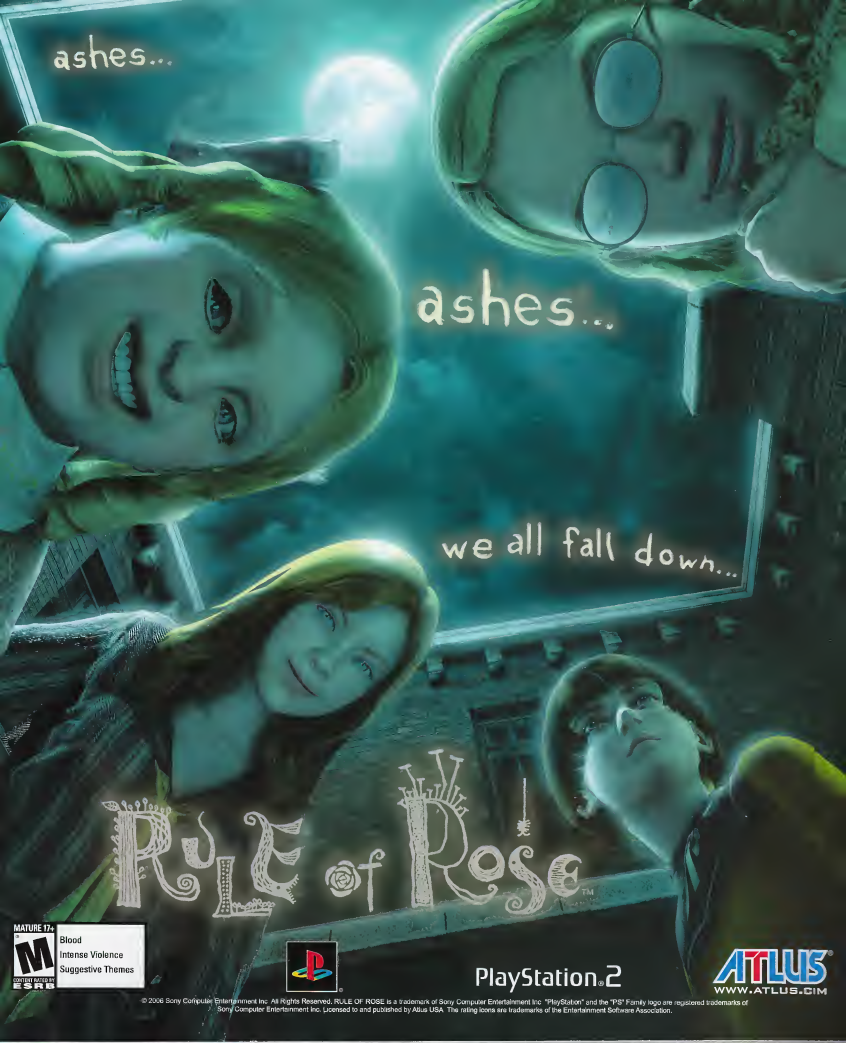
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